

Weird Stories

by

Charlotte Riddell

with an introduction by Emma Liggins

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Weird Stories by Charlotte Riddell
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Introduction

Born in Carrickfergus, near Belfast, into an Anglo-Irish family, Charlotte Riddell (1832-1906) grew up in Ireland, but moved to London in 1855 after her father's death to pursue a literary career. Initially battling against poverty and the difficulties of breaking into the publishing market as an unknown woman writer, she was later to enjoy success as a novelist and editor, producing a long list of popular novels between the 1860s and 1880s. In a bid to ensure respectability, she published under her married name of Mrs. J. H. Riddell. The first novel to achieve contemporary recognition, *George Geith of Fen Court* (1864), a tale of commerce set in the City of London, was followed by others such as *Home, Sweet Home* (1873), *Mortomley's Estate* (1874) and *The Head of the Firm* (1892), whose titles suggest her ongoing interest in property, inheritance and the world of business, aligning her with her contemporary novelist Anthony Trollope. She also worked as the editor of *Home Magazine* and *St. James's Magazine* in the 1860s, at a time when women editors and journalists, once seen as anomalous, were growing in numbers. Like other professional women writers of her day, she remained reliant on the income from her writing to support herself and her family; she remained childless but had a less than successful husband, whose debts she was often obliged to pay. Although she is not a familiar name to modern readers, having been rather unjustly neglected in some histories of Victorian women's writing, she deserves to be considered alongside the more well-known popular authors of her day, such as Wilkie Collins, Sheridan Le Fanu, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs Henry Wood. Such novelists wrote primarily in the sensational genre, which satisfied the public appetite for crime, violence and sensationalism at mid-century, and there are certainly elements of this in her supernatural stories, which borrow from sensation fiction in their emphasis.

Nineteenth-century readers were captivated by the supernatural, and the demand for the ghost story only increased as the century progressed. Riddell is notable amongst Victorian writers for her longer supernatural novels and for producing one of the first collections of ghost stories, which were only beginning to appear in collected form by the 1870s and 1880s. She published four

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supernatural novels, all of which appeared in Routledge's Christmas annuals, *Fairy Water* (1873), *The Uninhabited House* (1874), *The Haunted River* (1877) and *The Disappearance of Mr Jeremiah Redworth* (1878). The association of ghost stories with Christmas in the nineteenth century, perhaps attributable to Charles Dickens who published supernatural tales in the Christmas supplements to his popular journals *All the Year Round* and *Household Words* in the 1850s and 1860s, was well established by the time Riddell was producing her tales, and the public demand for the much loved annuals continued apace. Supernatural novels were something of an innovation in a period which seemed to prefer the shorter, more intense ghost story, and certainly some of Riddell's short stories are a lot longer than those of her contemporaries, though this allowed for greater commentary on social mores and more details about a wider range of characters, whilst building up tension behind the ostensible realism. Although she certainly contributed regularly to key mainstream journals such as *Temple Bar*, *London Society* and *Once a Week*, which were important showcases for contemporary fiction, it is not known whether the six ghost stories which make up *Weird Stories* (1882) had been previously published in periodicals, or were written specifically as a new collection, though critics have tended to assume the latter.¹ The sensation novelist, Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920), whose tales bear some similarities to those of Riddell in both style and subject matter, had been one of the first Victorian authors to publish a ghost story collection, though the five tales which comprise *Tales for Christmas Eve* (1873), later republished as *Twilight Stories* in 1879, had all previously appeared in *Temple Bar* in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Perhaps *Weird Stories* was an attempt to try something new, at a time when the author or publisher may have felt that her more realist style of fiction was going out of fashion.

The majority of Riddell's stories are haunted house narratives, drawing on and contributing to a very popular sub-genre of the ghost story prominent throughout the nineteenth century. Other notable examples are Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1853), Bram Stoker's 'The Judge's House' (1891), Sheridan Le

¹ See the useful introduction to E.F. Bleiler, *The Collected Ghost Stories of Mrs. J. H. Riddell* (New York: Dover, 1977), pp. xvi-xvii, which gives further details about her contributions to periodicals and Christmas annuals.

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Fanu's 'Green Tea' (1871) and Rhoda Broughton's 'The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth' (1868). *Weird Stories* was first published in the same year as the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in Britain, which set out to investigate and classify paranormal phenomena and, amongst other things, invited readers of the periodicals to report instances of haunting and hallucinations, so that the haunted house narrative acquired a new resonance. Such stories conventionally open with the narrator buying or renting a suspiciously cheap house and living there despite the mysterious warnings of the locals, and usually conclude with revelations of unavenged murders and acts of violence, lost or stolen wills, or buried family traumas. The desolation of these neglected houses, some of which have been lying empty for years, is often banished by laying the ghosts to rest, marriage and family reconciliations, or the discovery of hidden money, as these narratives emphasise the difficulties of maintaining well-managed households, or of finding suitable new homes. They allowed authors to explore issues around the acquisition and loss of property, inheritance, and material possessions, as well as women's financial dependency, their positions as wives, mothers and daughters, a matter of great personal interest to popular women writers such as Riddell and Broughton.

Riddell's haunted house narratives are particularly striking for their varied portrayal of female ghosts, or of strange monstrous women. Bracketing Riddell with fellow writers Margaret Oliphant and Florence Marryat, Vanessa D. Dickerson notes that all three women 'probed the nature of woman's special relation to the spiritual and the material' at a time when new legislation was only just addressing women's rights to their own earnings and their property; the second Married Women's Property Act, extending rights granted in the original Act of 1870, was passed in the same year as *Weird Stories*, 1882.² Sometimes the ghosts are miserly figures, like the pitiful old hag in 'The Old House in Vauxhall Walk', who counts her sovereigns in the middle of the night, taunted by the wretched poor family members whom she could have supported in her 'lost life'. The female murderer of 'The Open Door', who comes to search for a lost will, has become a

² Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 137.

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fierce, devilish figure who fights against the young clerk staying at the haunted Ladlow Hall, as 'the desire for money has transformed the demure angel into a fury the male can barely control'.³ In 'Nut Bush Farm' the mannish landlady Miss Gostock, who drives a hard bargain but looks like 'some monstrous figure in a story of giants and hobgoblins' is much scarier than the actual ghost of the previous tenant, perhaps also inviting the reader to consider the strangeness of women in charge of their own finances. The nonsense new owners or tenants of the properties signalled in the titles of these weird tales are determined not to listen to local superstitions, adopting the stance of the conventional male narrator of the ghost story about the impossibility of the paranormal, though succeeding events will shatter their confidence. The narratives often include meditations on the values and pleasures of property; the son and heir in 'The Old House in Vauxhall Walk', originally describing himself as 'houseless – homeless – hopeless!' after a quarrel with his father, finds that his encounter with the miserly ghost makes him reappraise his attitudes to money, particularly as the miser's hoarded gold, discovered behind the smashed mirror at the end of the story, will guarantee his inheritance. 'Walnut-Tree House' offers a variation on this theme with its figure of the uncanny ghost of a neglected child, who died young, which follows the owner around his new abode. Perhaps acting as a reminder of the responsibilities of fatherhood and inheritance, his presence, rather benign than malevolent, serves to facilitate the owner's marriage to the dead boy's long-lost sister, who will produce children to enliven the once 'desolate and deserted' Walnut-Tree House.

As Jenny Uglow has pointed out in her discussion of Victorian women's ghost stories, 'Although – perhaps because – they were written as unpretentious entertainments, ghost stories seemed to give their writers a licence to experiment, to push the boundaries of fiction a little further'.⁴ Whilst publishers often had control over the endings of Victorian novels, which also had to be fit to appear in public lending libraries, the author could conclude her short stories in alternative, ambiguous ways or obliquely address themes,

³ Dickerson, p. 139.

⁴ Jenny Uglow, 'Introduction', *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* ed. Richard Dalby (London: Virago, 1992), p. xiv.

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such as female sexuality or racial otherness, which might be considered too risqué or shocking for polite readers of the novel. In 'Old Mrs Jones', the ghostly figure of the title is the murdered wife of the dissolute and disreputable Dr Jones, who, it is revealed, has fallen into 'evil habits' of drinking, gambling and promiscuity. With his preference for 'bold, flaunting women', his choice of wife cannot fail to give the locals something to gossip about. However, not only is the new Mrs Jones little, old and ugly, she is also of a different race, 'not black but exceedingly brown', at a time when 'it would be most undesirable to introduce foreigners of no respectable colour into the bosom of British families who had made their money in the City'. In this story Riddell taps into contemporary fears of the foreigner, whose wealth may be contaminated, highlighting the hypocrisy of respectable British society during a period of patriotic imperialism. Those who recoil in horror from the apparition of the witch-like Mrs Jones, who haunts the otherwise splendid house rented by Richard and Mrs Tippens, are also recoiling from her otherness, her threatening 'dark face and fierce black eyes', out of place in the traditional British homestead. The ending of the story shows the house going up in flames, with a distressed figure with streaming grey hair standing on the parapet, described by one of the passersby as 'the witch the doctor married, and fire alone can destroy her!' As Dr Jones has been discovered living under another name with the remains of an embalmed body hidden in his laboratory, it is assumed that this is the ghost of Mrs Jones who must be destroyed in this way, perhaps as a punishment for her ferocity. This draws heavily on Charlotte Brontë's widely-read Gothic tale *Jane Eyre* (1847), which similarly features a fierce and angry woman of another race who Jane believes to be a ghost, but is actually Mr Rochester's Jamaican wife, who has been imprisoned in the attic for fifteen years. She also dies in a fire in the final chapters, and is visible on the rooftops like old Mrs Jones. Both Brontë and Riddell use Gothic elements in their narratives to draw attention to the plight of the foreign woman and the racial prejudices of the British.

The supernatural encounters, their matter-of-fact description only serving to increase the tension, produce what one nervous tenant calls 'this terror of the unseen', which continues to disturb both characters and readers even after the troubling histories of

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the unquiet ghosts have been revealed and their spirits laid to rest. Like other ghost stories of this period, these tales also show a fascination for the psychological, another arena of the unknown to be explored by Sigmund Freud and a new generation of psychoanalysts at the turn of the century. ‘Old Mrs Jones’ focuses on the figure of the prudent and sensible Anne Jane, who cannot sleep for dreaming of the ghostly figure of the title, and ultimately leads the police to the murderer’s hideout by sleepwalking under the guidance of Mrs Jones’ ghost to his new address. The causes of sleepwalking, hallucinations, and visions of the future were all very topical - they were discussed in new journals of psychology and scientific treatises in the 1890s and Freud would go on to investigate *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 – all of which contributed to the wide appeal of the ghost story at the end of the nineteenth century. With their monstrous women and uncanny children, their tales of dissolution, greed and murder behind the facade of splendid houses, Charlotte Riddell’s stories will continue to appeal to the modern reader.

EMMA LIGGINS

FURTHER READING

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Walnut-Tree House

Chapter One – The New Owner

Many years ago there stood at the corner of a street leading out of Upper Kennington Lane a great red brick house, covering a goodly area of ground, and surrounded by gardens magnificent in their proportions when considered in relation to the populous neighbourhood mentioned.

Originally a place of considerable pretention; a gentleman's seat in the country probably when Lambeth Marsh had not a shop in the whole of it; when Vauxhall Gardens were still *in nubibus*; when no South-Western Railway was planned or thought of; when London was comparatively a very small place, and its present suburbs were mere country villages—hamlets lying quite remote from the heart of the city.

Once, the house in question had been surrounded by a small park, and at that time there were fish-ponds in the grounds, and quite a stretch of meadow-land within the walls. Bit by bit, however, the park had been cut up into building ground and let off on building leases; the meadows were covered with bricks and mortar, shops were run up where cows once chewed the cud, and the roar and rumble of London traffic sounded about the old house and the deserted garden, formerly quiet and silent as though situated in some remote part of the country.

Many a time in the course of the generations that had come and gone, been born and buried, since the old house was built, the freehold it covered changed hands. On most estates of this kind round London there generally is a residence, which passes like a horse from buyer to buyer. When it has served one man's need it is put up for sale and bid for by another. When rows and rows of houses, and line after line of streets, have obliterated all the familiar marks, it is impossible to cultivate a sentiment as regards property; and it is unlikely that the descendants of the first possessors of Walnut-Tree House who had grown to be country folk and lived in great state, oblivious of business people, and entertaining a great contempt for trade, knew that in a very un-

desirable part of London there still stood the residence where the first successful man of their family went home each day from his counting-house over against St. Mildred's Church, in The Poultry.

One very wet evening, in an autumn the leaves of which have been dead and gone this many a year, Walnut-Tree House, standing grim and lonely in the mournful twilight, looked more than ordinarily desolate and deserted.

There was not a sign of life about it; the shutters were closed—the rusty iron gates were fast locked—the approach was choked up with grass and weeds—through no chink did the light of a single candle flicker. For seven years it had been given over to rats and mice and black beetles; for seven years no one had been found to live in it; for seven years it had remained empty, while its owner wore out existence in fits of moody dejection or of wild frenzy in the madhouse close at hand; and now that owner was dead and buried and forgotten, and the new owner was returning to take possession. This new owner had written to his lawyers, or rather he had written to the lawyers of his late relative, begging them to request the person in charge of the house to have rooms prepared for his arrival; and, when the train drew into the station at Waterloo, he was met by one of the clerks in Messrs. Timpson and Co.'s office, who, picking out Mr. Stainton, delivered to that gentleman a letter from the firm, and said he would wait and hear if there were any message in reply.

Mr. Stainton read the letter—looked at the blank flyleaf—and then, turning back to the first words, read what his solicitors had to say all through once again, this time aloud.

"The house has stood empty for more than seven years," he said, half addressing the clerk and half speaking to himself. "Must be damp and uninhabitable; there is no one living on the premises. Under these circumstances we have been unable to comply with your directions, and can only recommend you to go to an hotel till we are able personally to discuss future arrangements."

"Humph," said the new owner, after he had finished. "I'll go and take a look at the place, anyhow. Is it far from here, do you know?" he asked, turning to the young man from Timpsons'.

"No, sir; not very far."

"Can you spare time to come over there with me?" continued Mr. Stainton.

The young man believed that he could, adding, "If you want to go into the house we had better call for the key. It is at an estate agent's in the Westminster Bridge Road."

"I cannot say I have any great passion for hotels," remarked the new owner, as he took his seat in the cab.

"Indeed, sir?"

"No; either they don't suit me, or I don't suit them. I have led a wild sort of life: not much civilisation in the bush, or at the gold-fields, I can tell you. Rooms full of furniture, houses where a fellow must keep to the one little corner he has hired, seem to choke me. Then I have not been well, and I can't stand noise and the trampling of feet. I had enough of that on board ship; and I used to lie awake at nights and think how pleasant it would be to have a big house all to myself, to do as I liked in."

"Yes, sir," agreed the clerk.

"You see, I have been used to roughing it, and I can get along very well for a night without servants."

"No doubt, sir."

"I suppose the house is in substantial repair—roof tight, and all that sort of thing?"

"I can't say, I am sure, sir."

"Well, if there is a dry corner where I can spread a rug, I shall sleep there to-night."

The clerk coughed. He looked out of the window, and then he looked at Messrs. Timpsons' client.

"I do not think—" he began, apologetically, and then stopped.

"You don't think what?" asked the other.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but I don't think—I really do not think, if I were you, I'd go to that house to-night."

"Why not?"

"Well, it has not been slept in for nearly seven years, and it must be blue mouldy with damp; and if you have been ill, that is all the more reason you should not run such a risk. And, besides—"

"Besides?" suggested Mr. Stainton. "Out with it! Like a post-script, no doubt, that 'besides' holds the marrow of the argument."

"The house has stood empty for years, sir, because—there is no use in making any secret of it—the place has a bad name."

"What sort of a bad name—unhealthy?"

"Oh, no!"

“Haunted?”

The clerk inclined his head. “You have hit it, sir,” he said.

“And that is the reason no one has lived there?”

“We have been quite unable to let the house on that account.”

“The sooner it gets unhaunted, then, the better,” retorted Mr. Stainton. “I shall certainly stop there to-night. You are not disposed to stay and keep me company, I suppose?”

With a little gesture of dismay the clerk drew back. Certainly, this was one of the most unconventional of clients. The young man from Timpsons’ did not at all know what to make of him.

“A rough sort of fellow,” he said afterwards, when describing the new owner; “boorish; never mixed with good society, that sort of thing.”

He did not in the least understand this rich man, who treated him as an equal, who objected to hotels, who didn’t mind taking up his abode in a house where not even a drunken charwoman could be induced to stop, and who calmly asked a stranger on whom he had never set eyes before—a clerk in the respectable office of Timpson and Co., a young fellow anxious to rise in the world, careful as to his associates, particular about the whiteness of his shirts and the sit of his collar and the cut of his coats—to “rough” things with him in that dreadful old dungeon, where, perhaps, he might even be expected to light a fire.

Still, he did not wish to offend the new owner. Messrs. Timpson expected him to be a profitable client; and to that impartial firm the money of a boor would, he knew, seem as good as the money of a count.

“I am very sorry,” he stammered; “should only have felt too much honoured; but the fact is—previous engagement—”

Mr. Stainton laughed.

“I understand,” he said. “Adventures are quite as much out of your line as ghosts. And now tell me about this apparition. Does the ‘old man’ walk?”

“Not that I ever heard of” answered the other.

“Is it, then, the miserable beggar who tried to do for himself?”

“It is not the late Mr. Stainton, I believe,” said the young man, in tone which mildly suggested that reference to a client of Timpsons’ as a “miserable beggar” might be considered bad taste.

“Then who on earth is it?” persisted Mr. Stainton.

“If you must know, sir, it is a child—a child who has driven every tenant in succession out of the house.”

The new owner burst into a hearty laugh—a laugh which gave serious offence to Timpsons’ clerk.

“That is too good a joke,” said Mr. Stainton. “I do not know when I heard anything so delicious.”

“It is a fact, whether it be delicious or not,” retorted the young man, driven out of all his former propriety of voice and demeanour by the contemptuous ridicule this “digger” thought fit to cast on his story; “and I, for one, would not, after all I have heard about your house, pass a night in it—no, not if anybody offered me fifty pounds down.”

“Make your mind easy, my friend,” said the new owner, quietly.

“I am not going to bid for your company. The child and I can manage, I’ll be bound, to get on very comfortably by ourselves.”

Chapter Two – The Child

It was later on in the same evening; Mr. Stainton had an hour previously taken possession of Walnut-Tree House, dismissed his cab, bidden Timpsons’ clerk good evening, and, having ordered in wood and coals from the nearest greengrocer, besides various other necessary articles from various other tradesmen, he now stood by the front gate waiting the coming of the goods purchased.

As he waited, he looked up at the house, which in the uncertain light of street lamps appeared gloomier and darker than had been the case even in the gathering twilight.

The long rows of shuttered windows, the silent solemnity of the great trees, remnants of a once goodly avenue that had served to give its name to Walnut-Tree House; the appalling silence of everything within the place, when contrasted with the noise of passing cabs and whistling street boys, and men trudging home with unfurled umbrellas and women scudding along with dragged petticoats, might well have impressed even an unimpressible man, and Edgar Stainton, in spite of his hard life and rough exterior, was impressionable and imaginative.

“It has an ‘uncanny’ look, certainly,” he considered; “but is not so cheerless for a lonely man as the ‘bush’; and though I am not

over-tired, I fancy I shall sleep more soundly in my new home than I did many a night at the goldfields. When once I can get a good fire up I shall be all right. Now, I wonder when those coals are coming!”

As he turned once again towards the road, he beheld on its way the sack of fuel with which the nearest greengrocer said he thought he could—indeed, said he would—“oblige” him. A ton—half a ton—quarter of a ton, the greengrocer affirmed would be impossible until the next day; but a sack—yes—he would promise that. Bill should bring it round; and Bill was told to put his burden on the truck, and twelve bundles of wood, “and we’ll make up the rest to-morrow,” added Bill’s master, with the air of one who has conferred a favour.

In the distance Mr. Stainton descried a very grimy Bill, and a very small boy, coming along with the truck leisurely, as though the load had been Herculean.

Through the rain he watched the pair advancing and greeted Bill with a glad voice of welcome.

“So you’ve come at last; that’s right. Better late than never. Bring them this way. I’ll have this small lot shut in the kitchen for the night.”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” answered Bill, “I don’t think you will—that is to say, not by me. As I told our governor, I’ll take ’em to the house as you’ve sold ’em to the house, but I won’t set a foot inside it.”

“Do you mean to say you are going to leave them out on the pavement?” asked Mr. Stainton.

“Well, sir, I don’t mind taking them to the front door if it’ll be a convenience.”

“That will do. You are a brave lot of people in these parts I must say.”

“As for that,” retorted Bill, with sack on back and head bent forward, “I dare say we’re as brave about here as where you come from.”

“It is not impossible,” retorted Mr. Stainton; “there are plenty of cowards over there too.”

With a feint of being very much afraid, Bill, after he had shot his coals on the margin of the steps, retreated from the door, which stood partly open, and when the boy who brought up the

wood was again out with the truck, said, putting his knuckles to his eyebrows: "Beg pardon, sir, but I suppose you couldn't give us a drop of beer? Very wet night, sir."

"No, I could not," answered Mr. Stainton, very decidedly. "I shall have to shovel these coals into the house myself; and, as for the night, it is as wet for me as it is for you."

Nevertheless, as Bill shuffled along the short drive—shuffling wearily—like a man who, having nearly finished one day's hard work, was looking forward to beginning another hard day in the morning, the new owner relented.

"Here," he said, picking out a sixpence to give him, "it isn't your fault, I suppose, that you believe in old women's tales."

"Thank you kindly, sir," Bill answered; "I am sure I am extremely obliged; but if I was in your shoes I wouldn't stop in that house—you'll excuse me, sir, meaning no offence—but I wouldn't; indeed I wouldn't."

"It seems to have got a good name, at any rate," thought Mr. Stainton, while retracing his steps to the banned tenement. "Let us see what effect a fire will have in routing the shadows."

He entered the house, and, striking a match, lighted some candles he had brought in with him from a neighbouring oil-shop.

Years previously the gas company, weary of receiving no profit from the house, had taken away their meter and cut off their connections. The water supply was in the same case, as Mr. Stainton, going round the premises before it grew quite dark, had discovered.

Of almost all small articles of furniture easily broken by careless tenants, easily removed by charwomen, the place was perfectly bare; and as there were no portable candlesticks in which to place the lights the new tenant was forced to make his illumination by the help of some dingy mirrors provided with sconces, and to seek such articles as he needed by the help of a guttering mould candle stuck in the neck of a broken bottle. After an inspection of the ground-floor rooms he decided to take up his quarters for the night in one which had evidently served as a library.

In the centre of the apartment there was the table covered with leather. Around the walls were bookcases, still well filled with volumes, too uninviting to borrow, too valueless in the opinion of the ignorant to steal. In one corner stood a bureau, where the man,

who for so many years had been dead even while living, kept his letters and papers.

The floor was bare. Once a Turkey carpet had been spread over the centre of the polished oak boards, but it lay in its wonted place no longer; between the windows hung a convex mirror, in which the face of any human being looked horrible and distorted; whilst over the mantle-shelf, indeed, forming a portion of it, was a long, narrow glass, bordered by a frame ornamented with a tracery of leaves and flowers. The ceiling was richly decorated, and, spite of the dust and dirt and neglect of years, all the appointments of the apartment he had selected gave Edgar Stainton the impression that it was a good thing to be the owner of such a mansion, even though it did chance to be situated as much out of the way of fashionable London as the diggings whence he had come.

"And there is not a creature but myself left to enjoy it all," he mused, as he sat looking into the blazing coals. "My poor mother, how she would have rejoiced to-night, had she lived to be the mistress of so large a place. And my father, what a harbour this would have seemed after the storms that buffeted him. Well, they are better off, I know; and yet I cannot help thinking how strange it all is—that I, who went away a mere beggar, should come home rich, to be made richer, and yet stand so utterly alone that in the length and breadth of England I have not a relative to welcome me or to say I wish you joy of your inheritance."

He had eaten his frugal supper, and now, pushing aside the table on which the remains of his repast were spread, he began walking slowly up and down the room, thinking over the past and forming plans for the future.

As he was buried in reflection, the fire began to die down without his noticing the fact; but a sudden feeling of chilliness at length causing him instinctively to look towards the hearth, he threw some wood into the grate, and, while the flames went blazing up the wide chimney, piled on coals as though he desired to set the house alight.

While he was so engaged there came a knock at the door of the room—a feeble, hesitating knock, which was repeated more than once before it attracted Mr. Stainton's attention.

When it did, being still busy with the fire, and forgetting he was alone in the house, he called out, "Come in."

Along the panels there stole a rustling sort of touch, as if someone were feeling uncertainly for the handle—a curious noise, as of a weak hand fumbling about the door in the dark; then, in a similar manner, the person seeking admittance tried to turn the lock.

“Come in, can’t you?” repeated Mr. Stainton; but even as he spoke he remembered he was, or ought to be, the sole occupant of the mansion.

He was not alarmed; he was too much accustomed to solitude and danger for that; but he rose from his stooping position and instinctively seized his revolver, which he had chanced, while unpacking some of his effects, to place on the top of the bureau.

“Come in, whoever you are,” he cried; but seeing the door remained closed, though the intruder was evidently making futile efforts to open it, he strode half-way across the room, and then stopped, amazed.

For suddenly the door opened, and there entered, shyly and timidly, a little child—a child with the saddest face mortal ever beheld; a child with wistful eyes and long, ill-kept hair; a child poorly dressed, wasted and worn, and with the mournfullest expression on its countenance that face of a child ever wore.

“What a hungry little beggar,” thought Mr. Stainton. “Well, young one, and what do you want here?” he added, aloud. The boy never answered, never took the slightest notice of his questioner, but simply walked slowly round the room, peering into all the corners, as if looking for something. Searching the embrasures of the windows, examining the recesses beside the fireplace, pausing on the hearth to glance under the library table, and finally, when the doorway was reached once more, turning to survey the contents of the apartment with an eager and yet hopeless scrutiny.

“What *is* it you want, my boy?” asked Mr. Stainton, glancing as he spoke at the child’s poor thin legs, and short, shabby frock, and shoes well-nigh worn out, and arms bare and lean and unbeautiful. “Is it anything I can get for you?”

Not a word—not a whisper; only for reply a glance of the wistful brown eyes.

“Where do you come from, and who do you belong to?” persisted Mr. Stainton.

The child turned slowly away.

"Come, you shall not get off so easily as you seem to imagine," persisted the new owner, advancing towards his visitor. "You have no business to be here at all; and before you go you must tell me how you chance to be in this house, and what you expected to find in this room."

He was close to the doorway by this time, and the child stood on the threshold, with its back towards him. Mr. Stainton could see every detail of the boy's attire—his little plaid frock, which he had outgrown, the hooks which fastened it; the pinafore, soiled and crumpled, tied behind with strings broken and knotted; in one place the skirt had given from the body, and a piece of thin, poor flannel showed that the child's under habiliments matched in shabbiness his exterior garments.

"Poor little chap," thought Mr. Stainton. "I wonder if he would like something to eat. Are you hungry, my lad?"

The child turned and looked at him earnestly, but answered never a word.

"I wonder if he is dumb," marvelled Mr. Stainton; and, seeing he was moving away, put out a hand to detain him. But the child eluded his touch, and flitted out into the hall and up the wide staircase with swift, noiseless feet.

Only waiting to snatch a candle from one of the sconces, Mr. Stainton pursued as fast as he could follow.

Up the easy steps he ran at the top of his speed; but, fast as he went, the child went faster. Higher and higher he beheld the tiny creature mounting, then, still keeping the same distance between them, it turned when it reached the top story and trotted along a narrow corridor with rooms opening off to right and left. At the extreme end of this passage a door stood ajar. Through this the child passed, Mr. Stainton still following.

"I have run you to earth at last," he said, entering and closing the door. "Why, where has the boy gone?" he added, holding the candle above his head and gazing round the dingy garret in which he found himself.

The room was quite empty. He examined it closely, but could find no possible outlet save the door, and a skylight which had evidently not been opened for years. There was no furniture in the apartment, except a truckle bedstead, a rush-bottomed chair, and a

rickety washstand. No wardrobe, or box or press where even a kitten might have lain concealed.

"It is very strange," muttered Mr. Stainton, as he turned away baffled. "Very strange!" he repeated, while he walked along the corridor. "I don't understand it at all," he decided, proceeding slowly down the topmost flight of stairs; but then all at once he stopped.

"IT IS THE CHILD!" he exclaimed aloud, and the sound of his own voice woke strange echoes through the silence of that desolate house.

"IT IS THE CHILD!" And he descended the principal staircase very slowly, with bowed head, and his grave, thoughtful face graver and more thoughtful than ever.

Chapter Three – Seeking for Information

It was enough to make any man look grave; and as time went on the new owner of Walnut-Tree House found himself pondering continually as to what the mystery could be which attached to the child he had found in possession of his property, and who had already driven tenant after tenant out of the premises. Inclined at first to regard the clerk's story as a joke, and his own experience on the night of his arrival a delusion, it was impossible for him to continue incredulous when he found, even in broad daylight, that terrible child stealing down the staircase and entering the rooms, looking—looking, for something it never found.

Never after the first horror was over did Mr. Stainton think of leaving the house in consequence of that haunting presence which had kept the house tenantless. It would have been worse than useless, he felt. With the ocean stretching between, his spirit would still be in the old mansion at Lambeth—his mental vision would always be watching the child engaged in the weary search to which there seemed no end—that never appeared to produce any result.

At bed and at board he had company, or the expectation of it. No apartment in the building was secure from intrusion. It did not matter where he lay; it did not matter where he ate; between sleeping and waking, between breakfast and dinner, whenever the notion seized it, the child came gliding in, looking, looking, looking,

and never finding; not lingering longer than was necessary to be certain the object of its search was absent, but wandering hither and thither, from garret to kitchen, from parlour to bed-chamber, in that quest which still seemed fresh as when first begun.

Mr. Stainton went to his solicitors as the most likely persons from whom to obtain information on the subject, and plunged at once into the matter.

"Who is the child supposed to be, Mr. Timpson?" he asked, making no secret that he had seen it.

"Well, that is really very difficult to say," answered Mr. Timpson.

"There *was* a child once, I suppose—a real child—flesh and blood?"

Mr. Timpson took off his spectacles and wiped them.

"There were two; yes, certainly, in the time of Mr. Felix Stainton—a boy and a girl."

"In that house?"

"In that house. They survived him."

"And what became of them?"

"The girl was adopted by a relation of her father's, and the—boy—died."

"Oh the boy died, did he? Do you happen to know what he died of?"

"No; I really do not. There was nothing wrong about the affair, however, if that is what you are thinking of. There never was a hint of that sort."

Mr. Stainton sat silent for a minute; then he said: "Mr. Timpson, I can't shake off the idea that somehow there has been foul play with regard to those children. Who were they?"

"Felix Stainton's grandchildren. His daughter made a low marriage, and he cast her adrift. After her death the two children were received at Walnut-Tree House on sufferance—fed and clothed, I believe, that was all; and when the old man died the heir-at-law permitted them to remain."

"Alfred Stainton?"

"Yes; the unhappy man who became insane. His uncle died intestate, and he consequently succeeded to everything but the personality, which was very small, and of which these children had a share."

"There was never any suspicion you say, of foul play on the part of the late owner?"

"Dear, dear no; quite the contrary."

"Then can you throw the least light on the mystery?"

"Not the least; I wish I could."

For all that, Mr. Stainton carried away an impression Mr. Timpson knew more of the matter than he cared to tell; and was confirmed in this opinion by a chance remark from Mr. Timpson's partner, whom he met in the street almost immediately after.

"Why can't you let the matter rest, Mr. Stainton?" asked the Co. with some irritation of manner when he heard the object of their client's visit. "What is the use of troubling your head about a child who has been lying in Lambeth Churchyard these dozen years? Take my advice, have the house pulled down and let or sell the ground for building. You ought to get a pot of money for it in that neighbourhood. If there were a wrong done it is too late to set it right now."

"What wrong do you refer to?" asked Mr. Stainton eagerly, thinking he had caught Timpson's partner napping. But that gentleman was too sharp for him.

"I remarked *if* there were a wrong done—not that there had been one," he answered; and then, without a pause, added, "We shall hope to hear from you that you have decided to follow our advice."

But Mr. Stainton shook his head.

"I will not pull down the old house just yet," he said, and walked slowly away. "There is a mystery behind it all," he considered. "I must learn more about these children. Perhaps some of the local tradespeople may recollect them."

But the local tradespeople for the most part were newcomers—or else had not supplied "the house."

"So far as ever I could understand," said one 'family butcher,' irascibly sharpening his knife as he spoke, "there was not much to supply. *That* custom was not worth speaking of. I hadn't it, so what I am saying is not said on my own account. A scrag end of neck of mutton—a bit of gravy beef—two pennyworth of sheep's liver—that was the sort of thing. Misers, sir, misers; the old gentleman bad, and the nephew worse. A bad business, first and last. But what else could be expected? When people as can afford to live on

the fat of the land never have a sirloin inside their doors, why, worse must come of it. No, sir, I never set eyes on the children to my knowledge; I only knew there were children by hearing one of them was dead, and that it was the poorest funeral ever crossed a decent threshold."

"Poor little chap," thought Mr. Stainton, looking straight out into the street for a moment; then added, "lest the family misfortunes should descend to me, you had better send round a joint to Walnut-Tree House."

"Lor', sir, are you the gentleman as is living there? I beg your pardon, I am sure, but I have been so bothered with questions in regard of that house and those children that I forget my manners when I talk about them. A joint, sir—what would you please to have?"

The new owner told him; and while he counted out the money to pay for it Mr. Parker remarked:

"There is only one person I can think of sir, likely to be able to give any information about the matter."

"And that is?"

"Mr. Hennings, at the 'Pedlar's Dog.' He had some acquaintance with the old lady as was housekeeper both to Mr. Felix Stainton and the gentleman that went out of his mind."

Following the advice, the new owner repaired to the 'Pedlar's Dog,' where (having on his first arrival at Walnut-Tree House ordered some creature comforts from that well-known public) he experienced a better reception than had been accorded to him by Mr. Parker.

"Do I know Walnut-Tree House, sir?" said Mr. Hennings, repeating his visitor's question.

"Well, yes, rather. Why, you might as well ask me, do I know the Pedlar's Dog." As boy and man I can remember the old house for close on five-and-fifty years. I remember Mr. George Stainton; he used to wear a skull-cap and knee-breeches. There was an orchard then where Stainton Street is now, and his whole time was taken up in keeping the boys out of it. Many a time I have run from him."

"Did you ever see anything of the boy and girl who were there, after Mr. Alfred succeeded to the property—Felix Stainton's grandchildren, I mean?" asked the new owner, when a pause in Mr.

Henning's reminiscences enabled him to take his part in the conversation.

"Well, sir, I may have seen the girl, but I can't bring it to my recollection; the boy I do remember, however. He came over here two or three times with Mrs. Toplis, who kept house for both Mr. Staintons, and I took notice of him, both because he looked so peaky and old-fashioned, and also an account of the talk about him."

"There was talk about him, then?"

"Bless you, yes, sir; as much talk while he was living as since he died. Everybody thought he ought to have been the heir."

"Why?" enquired the new owner.

"Because there was a will made leaving the place to him."

Here was information. Mr. Stainton's heart seemed to stand still for a second and then leap on with excitement.

"Who made the will?"

"The grandfather, Felix Stainton, to be sure; who else should make it?"

"I did not mean that. Was it not drawn out by a solicitor?"

"Oh! Yes—now I understand you, sir. The will was drawn right enough by Mr. Quinance, in the Lambeth Road, a very clever lawyer."

"Not by Timpson, then? How was that?"

"The old man took the notion of making it late one night, and so Mrs. Toplis sent to the nearest lawyer she knew of."

"Yes; and then?"

"Well, the will was made and signed and witnessed, and everything regular; and from that day to this no one knows what has become of it."

"How very strange."

"Yes, sir, it is more than strange—unaccountable. At first Mr. Quinance was suspected of having given it up to Mr. Alfred; but Mrs. Toplis and Quinance's clerk—he has succeeded to the business now—say that old Felix insisted upon keeping it himself. So, whether he destroyed it or the nephew got hold of it, Heaven only knows; for no man living does, I think."

"And the child — the boy, I mean?"

"If you want to hear all about him, sir, Mrs. Toplis is the one to tell you. If you have a mind to give a shilling to a poor old lady

who always did try to keep herself respectable, and who, I will say, paid her way honourable as long as she had a sixpence to pay it honourable with, you cannot do better than go and see Mrs. Toplis, who will talk to you for hours about the time she lived at Walnut-Tree House.”

And with this delicate hint that his minutes were more valuable than the hours of Mrs. Toplis, Mr. Hennings would have closed the interview, but that his visitor asked where he should be able to find the housekeeper.

“A thousand pardons!” he answered, with an air; “forgetting the very cream and marrow of it, wasn’t I? Mrs. Toplis, sir, is to be found in Lambeth Workhouse—and a pity, too.”

Edgar Stainton turned away, heart-sick. Was this all wealth had done for his people and those connected with them?

No man seemed to care to waste a moment in speaking about their affairs; no one had a good word for or kindly memory of them. The poorest creature he met in the streets might have been of more use in the world than they. The house they had lived in mentioned as if a curse rested on the place; themselves only recollected as leaving everything undone which it befitted their station to do. An old servant allowed to end her days in the workhouse!

“Heaven helping me,” he thought, “I will not so misuse the wealth which has been given me.”

The slight put upon his family tortured and made him wince, and the face of the dead boy who ought to have been the heir seemed, as he hurried along the streets, to pursue and look on him with a wistful reproach.

“If I cannot lay that child I shall go mad,” he said, almost audibly, “as mad, perhaps, as Alfred Stainton.” And then a terrible fear took possession of him. The horror of that which is worse than any death made for the moment this brave, bold man more timid than a woman.

“God preserve my senses,” he prayed, and then, determinedly putting that phantom behind him, he went on to the Workhouse.

Chapter Four – Brother and Sister

Mr. Stainton had expected to find Mrs. Toplis a decrepit crone, bowed with age and racked with rheumatism, and it was therefore like a gleam of sunshine streaming across his path to behold a woman, elderly, certainly, but carrying her years with ease, ruddy cheeked, clear eyed, upright as a dart, who welcomed him with respectful enthusiasm.

“And so you are Mr. Edgar, the son of the dear old Captain,” she said, after the first greetings and explanations were over, after she had wiped her eyes and uttered many ejaculations of astonishment and expressions of delight. “Eh! I remember him coming to the house just after he was married, and telling me about the sweet lady his wife. I never heard a gentleman so proud; he never seemed tired of saying the words, ‘My wife’.”

“She was a sweet lady,” answered the new owner.

“And so the house has come to you, sir? Well, I wish you joy. I hope you may have peace, and health, and happiness, and prosperity in it. And I don’t see why you should not—no, indeed, sir.”

Edgar Stainton sat silent for a minute, thinking how he should best approach his subject.

“Mrs. Toplis,” he began at last, plunging into the very middle of the difficulty, “I want you to tell me about it. I have come here on purpose to ask you what it all means.”

The old woman covered her face with her hands, and he could see that she trembled violently.

“You need not be afraid to speak openly to me,” he went on. “I am quite satisfied there was some great wrong done in the house, and I want to put it right, if it lies in my power to do so. I am a rich man. I was rich when the news of this inheritance reached me, and I would gladly give up the property to-morrow if I could only undo whatever may have been done amiss. Mrs. Toplis shook her head. “Ah, sir; you can’t do that,” she said. “Money can’t bring back the dead to life; and, if it could, I doubt if even you could prove as good a friend to the poor child sleeping in the churchyard yonder as his Maker did when He took him out of this troublesome world. It was just soul rending to see the boy the last

few months of his life. I can't bear to think of it, sir! Often at night I wake in a fright, fancying I still hear the patter, patter of his poor little feet upon the stair."

"Do you know, it is a curious thing, but he doesn't frighten me," said Mr. Stainton; "that is when I am in the house; although when I am away from it the recollection seems to dog every step I take."

"What?" cried Mrs. Toplis. "*Have you, then, seen him too?* There what am I talking about? I hope, sir, you will forgive my foolishness."

"I see him constantly," was the calm reply.

"I wonder what it means!—I wonder what it can mean!" exclaimed the housekeeper, wringing her hands in dire perplexity and dismay.

"I do not know," answered the new owner, philosophically; "but I want you to help me to find out. I suppose you remember the children coming there at first?"

"Well, sir—well, they were poor Miss Mary's son and daughter. She ran away, you know, with a Mr. Fenton—made a very poor match; but I believe he was kind to her. When they were brought to us, a shivering little pair, my master was for sending them here. Ay, and he would have done it, too, if somebody had not said he could be made to pay for their keep. You never saw brother and sister so fond of one another—never. They were twins. But, Lor'! the boy was more like a father to the little girl than aught else. He'd have kept an apple a month rather than eat it unless she had half; and the same with everything. I think it was seeing that—watching the love they had, he for her and she for him, coming upon them unsuspected, with their little arms round one another's necks, made the old gentleman alter his mind about leaving the place to Mr. Alfred; for he said to me, one day, thoughtful like, pointing to them, 'Wonderful fond, Toplis!' and I answered, 'Yes, sir; for all the world like the Babes in the Wood;' not thinking of how lonely that meant—

"Shortly afterwards he took to his bed; and while he was lying there, no doubt, better thoughts came to him, for he used to talk about his wife and Miss Mary, and the Captain, your father, sir, and ask if the children were gone to bed, and such like—things he never used to mention before.

“So when he made the will Mr. Quinance drew out I was not surprised—no, not a bit. Though before that time he always spoke of Mr. Alfred as his heir, and treated him as such.”

“That will never was found,” suggested Mr. Stainton, anxious to get at another portion of the narrative.

“Never, sir; we hunted for it high and low. Perhaps I wronged him, but I always thought Mr. Alfred knew what became of it. After the old gentleman’s death the children were treated shameful—shameful. I don’t mean beaten, or that like; but half-starved and neglected. He would not buy them proper clothes, and he would not suffer them to wear decent things if anybody else bought them. It was just the same with their food. I durs’n’t give them even a bit of bread and butter unless it was on the sly; and, indeed, there was not much to give in that house. He turned regular miser. Hoarding came into the family with Mrs. Lancelot Stainton, Mr. Alfred’s great grandmother, and they went on from bad to worse, each one closer and nearer than the last, begging your pardon for saying so, sir; but it is the truth.”

“I fear so, Mrs. Toplis,” agreed the man, who certainly was neither close nor near.

“Well, sir, at last, when the little girl was about six years old, she fell sick, and we didn’t think she would get over the illness. While she was about at her worst, Mrs. May, her father’s sister, chanced to be stopping up in London, and, as Mr. Alfred refused to let a doctor inside his doors, she made no more ado but wrapped the child up in blankets, sent for a cab, and carried her off to her own lodgings. Mr. Alfred made no objection to that. All he said as she went through the hall was: ‘If you take her now, remember, you must keep her.’ ‘Very well,’ she replied, ‘I will keep her.’”

“And the boy? the boy?” cried Mr. Stainton, in an agony of impatience.

“I am coming to him, sir, if you please. He just dwindled away after his sister and he were parted, and died in December, as she was taken away in the July.”

“What did he die of?”

“A broken heart, sir. It seems a queer thing to say about a child; but if ever a heart was broken his was. At first he was always wandering about the house looking for her, but towards the end he used to go up to his room and stay there all by himself. At last I

wrote to Mrs. May, but she was ill when the letter got to her, and when she did come up he was dead. My word, she talked to Mr. Alfred! I never heard any one person say so much to another. She declared he had first cheated the boy of his inheritance, and then starved him to death; but that was not true, the child broke his heart fretting after his sister."

"Yes; and when he was dead—"

"Sir, I don't like to speak of it, but as true as I am sitting here, the night he was put in his coffin he came pattering down just as usual, looking, looking for his sister. I went straight upstairs, and if I had not seen the little wasted body lying there still and quiet, I must have thought he had come back to life. We were never without him afterwards, never; that, and nothing else, drove Mr. Alfred mad. He used to think he was fighting the child and killing it. When the worst fits were on him he tried to trample it under foot or crush it up in a corner, and then he would sob and cry, and pray for *it* to be taken away. I have heard he recovered a little before he died, and said his uncle told him there was a will leaving all to the boy, but he never saw such a paper. Perhaps it was all talk, though, or that he was still raving?"

"You are quite positive there was no foul play as regards the child?" asked Mr. Stainton, sticking to that question pertinaciously.

"Certain, sir; I don't say but Mr. Alfred wished him dead. That is not murder, though."

"I am not clear about that," answered Mr. Stainton.

Chapter Five – The Next Afternoon

Mr. Stainton was trying to work off some portion of his perplexities by pruning the grimy evergreens in front of Walnut-Tree House, and chopping away at the undergrowth of weeds and couch grass which had in the course of years matted together beneath the shrubs, when his attention was attracted to two ladies who stood outside the great iron gate looking up at the house.

"It seems to be occupied now," remarked the elder, turning to her companion. "I suppose the new owner is going to live here. It looks just as dingy as ever; but you do not remember it, Mary."

"I think I do," was the answer. "As I look the place grows

familiar to me. I do recollect some of the rooms, I am sure just like a dream, as I remember Georgie. What I would give to have a peep inside."

At this juncture the new owner emerged from amongst the bushes, and, opening the gate, asked if the ladies would like to look over the place.

The elder hesitated; whilst the younger whispered, "Oh, aunt, pray do!"

"Thank you," said Mrs. May to the stranger, whom she believed to be a gardener; "but perhaps Mr. Stainton might object."

"No; he wouldn't, I know," declared the new owner. "You can go through the house if you wish. There is no one in it. Nobody lives there except myself."

"Taking charge, I suppose?" suggested Mrs. May blandly.

"Something of that sort," he answered.

"I do not think he is a caretaker," said the girl, as she and her relative passed into the old house together.

"What do you suppose he is, then?" asked her aunt.

"Mr. Stainton himself."

"Nonsense, child!" exclaimed Mrs. May, turning, nevertheless, to one of the windows, and casting a curious glance towards the new owner, who was now, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, walking idly up and down the drive.

After they had been all over the place, from hall to garret, with a peep into this room and a glance into that, Mrs. May found the man who puzzled her leaning against one of the pillars of the porch, waiting, apparently, for their reappearance.

"I am sure we are very much obliged to you," she began, with a hesitation in her manner.

"Pray do not mention it," he said.

"This young lady has sad associations connected with the house," Mrs. May proceeded, still doubtfully feeling her way.

He turned his eyes towards the girl for a moment, and, though her was down, saw she had been weeping.

"I surmised as much," he replied. "She is Miss Fenton, is she not?"

"Yes, certainly," was the answer; "and you are—"

"Edgar Stainton," said the new owner, holding out his hand.

"I am all alone here," he went on, after the first explanations

were over. "But I can manage to give you a cup of tea. Pray do come in, and let me feel I am not entirely alone in England."

Only too well pleased, Mrs. May complied, and ten minutes later the three were sitting round a fire, the blaze of which leapt and flickered upon the walls and over the ceiling, casting bright lights on the dingy mirrors and the dark oak shelves.

"It is all coming back to me now," said the girl softly, addressing her aunt. "Many an hour Georgie and I have sat on that hearth seeing pictures in the fire."

But she did not see something which was even then standing close beside her, and which the new owner had witnessed approach with a feeling of terror that precluded speech.

It was the child! The child searching about no longer for something it failed to find, but standing at the girl's side still and motionless, with its eyes fixed upon her face, and its poor, wasted figure nestling amongst the folds of her dress.

"Thank Heaven she does not see it!" he thought, and drew his breath, relieved.

No; she did not see it—though its wan cheek touched her shoulder, though its thin hand rested on her arm, though through the long conversation which followed it never moved from her side, nor turned its wistful eyes from her face.

When she went away—when she took her fresh young beauty out of the house it seemed to gladden and light up—the child followed her to the threshold; and then in an instant it vanished, and Mr. Stainton watched for its flitting up the staircase all in vain.

But later on in the evening, when he was sitting alone beside the fire, with his eyes bent on the glowing coals, and perhaps seeing pictures there, as Mary said she and her brother had done in their lonely childhood, he felt conscious, even without looking round, that the boy was there once again.

And when he fell to thinking of the long, long years during which the dead child had kept faithful and weary watch for his sister, searching through the empty rooms for one who never came, and then bethought him of the sister to whom her dead brother had become but the vaguest of memories, of the summers and winters during the course of which she had probably forgotten him altogether, he sighed deeply; and heard his sigh echoed behind him in the merest faintest whisper.

More, when he, thinking deeply about his newly found relative and trying to recall each feature in her face, each tone of her voice, found it impossible to dissociate the girl grown to womanhood from the child he had pictured to himself as wandering about the old house in company with her twin brother, their arms twined together, their thoughts one, their sorrows one, their poor pleasures one—he felt a touch on his hand, and knew the boy was beside him, looking with wistful eyes into the firelight, too.

But when he turned he saw that sadness clouded those eyes no longer. She was found; the lost had come again to meet a living friend on the once desolate hearth, and up and down the wide, desolate staircase those weary little feet pattered no longer.

The quest was over, the search ended; into the darksome corners of that dreary house the child's glance peered no longer. She was come! Through years he had kept faithful watch for her, but the waiting was ended now.

That night Edgar Stainton slept soundly; and yet when morning dawned he knew that once in the darkness he wakened suddenly and was conscious of a small, childish hand smoothing his pillow and touching his brow.

Sweet were the dreams which visited his rest subsequently; sweet as ought to be the dreams of a man who had said to his own soul — and meant to hold fast by words he had spoken:

“As I deal by that orphan girl, so may God deal with me!”

Chapter Six – The Missing Will

Ere long there were changes in the old house. Once again Mrs. Toplis reigned there, but this time with servants under her—with maids she could scold and lads she could harass.

The larder was well plenished, the cellars sufficiently stocked; windows formerly closely shuttered now stood open to admit the air; and on the drive grass grew no longer—too many footsteps passed that way for weeds to flourish.

It was Christmas-time. The joints in the butchers' shops were gay with ribbons; the grocers' windows were tricked out to delight the eyes of the children, young and old, who passed along.

In Mr. May's house up the Clapham Road all was excitement,

for the whole of the family—father, mother, grown-up sons and daughters—girls still in short frocks and boys in round jackets—were going to spend Christmas Eve with their newly-found cousin, whom they had adopted as a relation with a unanimity as rare as charming.

Cousin Mary also was going—Cousin Mary had got a new dress for the occasion, and was having her hair done up in a specially effective manner by Cissie May, when the toilette proceedings were interrupted by half a dozen young voices announcing:

“A gentleman in the parlour wants to see you, Mary. Pa says you are to make haste and come down immediately.”

Obediently Mary made haste as bidden and descended to the parlour, to find there the clerk from ‘Timpsons’ who met Mr. Stainton on his arrival in London.

His business was simple, but important. Once again he was the bearer of a letter from Timpson and Co., this time announcing to Miss Fenton that the will of Mr. Felix Stainton had been found, and that under it she was entitled to the interest of ten thousand pounds, secured upon the houses in Stainton Street.

“Oh! aunt, Oh! uncle, how rich we shall be,” cried the girl, running off to tell her cousins; but the uncle and aunt looked grave. They were wondering how this will might effect Edgar Stainton.

While they were still talking it over—after ‘Timpsons’ young man had taken his departure, Mr. Edgar Stainton himself arrived.

“Oh, it’s all right!” he said, in answer to their questions. “I found the will in the room where Felix Stainton died. Walnut-Tree House and all the freeholds were left to the poor little chap who died, chargeable with Mary’s ten thousand pounds, five hundred to Mrs. Toplis, and a few other legacies. Failing George, the property was to come to me. I have been to Quinance’s successor, and found out the old man and Alfred had a grievous quarrel, and that in consequence he determined to cut him out altogether. Where is Mary? I want to wish her joy.”

Mary was in the little conservatory, searching for a rose to put in her pretty brown hair. He went straight up to her, and said:

“Mary, dear, you have had one Christmas gift to-night, and I want you to take another with it.”

“What is it, Cousin Edgar?” she asked; but when she looked in his face she must have guessed his meaning, for she drooped her

head, and began pulling her sweet rose to pieces.

He took the flower, and with it her fingers.

“Will you have me, dear?” he asked. “I am but a rough fellow, I know; but I am true, and I love you dearly.”

Somehow, she answered him as he wished, and all spent a very happy evening in the old house.

Once, when he was standing close beside her in the familiar room, hand clasped in hand, Edgar Stainton saw the child looking at them.

There was no sorrow or yearning in his eyes as he gazed—only a great peace, a calm which seemed to fill and light them with an exquisite beauty.

The Open Door

Some people do not believe in ghosts. For that matter, some people do not believe in anything. There are persons who even affect incredulity concerning that open door at Ladlow Hall. They say it did not stand wide open—that they could have shut it; that the whole affair was a delusion; that they are sure it must have been a conspiracy; that they are doubtful whether there is such a place as Ladlow on the face of the earth; that the first time they are in Meadowshire they will look it up.

That is the manner in which this story, hitherto unpublished, has been greeted by my acquaintances. How it will be received by strangers is quite another matter. I am going to tell what happened to me exactly as it happened, and readers can credit or scoff at the tale as it pleases them. It is not necessary for me to find faith and comprehension in addition to a ghost story, for the world at large. If such were the case, I should lay down my pen.

Perhaps, before going further, I ought to premise there was a time when I did not believe in ghosts either. If you had asked me one summer's morning years ago when you met me on London Bridge if I held such appearances to be probable or possible, you would have received an emphatic "No" for answer.

But, at this rate, the story of the Open Door will never be told; so we will, with your permission, plunge into it immediately.

"Sandy!"

"What do you want?"

"Should you like to earn a sovereign?"

"Of course I should."

A somewhat curt dialogue, but we were given to curtness in the office of Messrs. Frimpton, Frampton and Fryer, auctioneers and estate agents, St Benet's Hill, City.

(My name is not Sandy or anything like it, but the other clerks so styled me because of a real or fancied likeness to some character, an ill-looking Scotchman, they had seen at the theatre. From this it may be inferred I was not handsome. Far from it. The only ugly specimen in my family, I knew I was very plain; and it chanced to

be no secret to me either that I felt grievously discontented with my lot.

I did not like the occupation of clerk in an auctioneer's office, and I did not like my employers.

We are all of us inconsistent, I suppose, for it was a shock to me to find they entertained a most cordial antipathy to me.)

"Because," went on Parton, a fellow, my senior by many years—a fellow who delighted in chaffing me, "I can tell you how to lay hands on one."

"How?" I asked, sulkily enough, for I felt he was having what he called his fun.

"You know that place we let to Carrison, the tea-dealer?" Carrison was a merchant in the China trade, possessed of fleets of vessels and towns of warehouses; but I did not correct Parton's expression, I simply nodded.

"He took it on a long lease, and he can't live in it; and our governor said this morning he wouldn't mind giving anybody who could find out what the deuce is the matter, a couple of sovereigns and his travelling expenses."

"Where is the place?" I asked, without turning my head; for the convenience of listening I had put my elbows on the desk and propped up my face with both hands.

"Away down in Meadowshire, in the heart of the grazing country."

"And what *is* the matter?" I further enquired.

"A door that won't keep shut."

"What?"

"A door that will keep open, if you prefer that way of putting it," said Parton.

"You are jesting."

"If I am, Carrison is not, or Fryer either. Carrison came here in a nice passion, and Fryer was in a fine rage; I could see he was, though he kept his temper outwardly. They have had an active correspondence it appears, and Carrison went away to talk to his lawyer. Won't make much by that move, I fancy."

"But tell me," I entreated, "why the door won't keep shut?"

"They say the place is haunted."

"What nonsense!" I exclaimed.

"Then you are just the person to take the ghost in hand. I

thought so while old Fryer was speaking.”

“If the door won’t keep shut,” I remarked, pursuing my own train of thought, “why can’t they let it stay open?”

“I have not the slightest idea. I only know there are two sovereigns to be made, and that I give you a present of the information.”

And having thus spoken, Parton took down his hat and went out, either upon his own business or that of his employers.

There was one thing I can truly say about our office, we were never serious in it. I fancy that is the case in most offices nowadays; at all events, it was the case in ours. We were always chaffing each other, playing practical jokes, telling stupid stories, scamping our work, looking at the clock, counting the weeks to next St Lubbock’s Day, counting the hours to Saturday.

For all that we were all very earnest in our desire to have our salaries raised, and unanimous in the opinion no fellows ever before received such wretched pay. I had twenty pounds a year, which I was aware did not half provide for what I ate at home. My mother and sisters left me in no doubt on the point, and when new clothes were wanted I always hated to mention the fact to my poor worried father.

We had been better off once, I believe, though I never remember the time. My father owned a small property in the country, but owing to the failure of some bank, I never could understand what bank, it had to be mortgaged; then the interest was not paid, and the mortgages foreclosed, and we had nothing left save the half-pay of a major, and about a hundred a year which my mother brought to the common fund.

We might have managed on our income, I think, if we had not been so painfully genteel; but we were always trying to do something quite beyond our means, and consequently debts accumulated, and creditors ruled us with rods of iron.

Before the final smash came, one of my sisters married the younger son of a distinguished family, and even if they had been disposed to live comfortably and sensibly she would have kept her sisters up to the mark. My only brother, too, was an officer, and of course the family thought it necessary he should see we preserved appearances.

It was all a great trial to my father, I think, who had to bear the

brunt of the dunning and harass, and eternal shortness of money; and it would have driven me crazy if I had not found a happy refuge when matters were going wrong at home at my aunt's. She was my father's sister, and had married so "dreadfully below her" that my mother refused to acknowledge the relationship at all.

For these reasons and others, Parton's careless words about the two sovereigns stayed in my memory.

I wanted money badly—I may say I never had sixpence in the world of my own—and I thought if I could earn two sovereigns I might buy some trifles I needed for myself, and present my father with a new umbrella. Fancy is a dangerous little jade to flirt with, as I soon discovered.

She led me on and on. First I thought of the two sovereigns; then I recalled the amount of the rent Mr. Carrison agreed to pay for Ladlow Hall; then I decided he would gladly give more than two sovereigns if he could only have the ghost turned out of possession. I fancied I might get ten pounds—twenty pounds. I considered the matter all day, and I dreamed of it all night, and when I dressed myself next morning I was determined to speak to Mr. Fryer on the subject.

I did so—I told that gentleman Parton had mentioned the matter to me, and that if Mr. Fryer had no objection, I should like to try whether I could not solve the mystery. I told him I had been accustomed to lonely houses, and that I should not feel at all nervous; that I did not believe in ghosts, and as for burglars, I was not afraid of them.

"I don't mind your trying," he said at last. "Of course you understand it is no cure, no pay. Stay in the house for a week; if at the end of that time you can keep the door shut, locked, bolted, or nailed up, telegraph for me, and I will go down—if not, come back. If you like to take a companion there is no objection."

I thanked him, but said I would rather not have a companion.

"There is only one thing, sir, I should like," I ventured.

"And that—?" he interrupted.

"Is a little more money. If I lay the ghost, or find out the ghost, I think I ought to have more than two sovereigns."

"How much more do you think you ought to have?" he asked.

His tone quite threw me off my guard, it was so civil and conciliatory, and I answered boldly: "Well, if Mr. Carrison cannot

now live in the place perhaps he wouldn't mind giving me a ten pound note."

Mr. Fryer turned, and opened one of the books lying on his desk. He did not look at or refer to it in any way—I saw that.

"You have been with us how long, Edlyd?" he said.

"Eleven months tomorrow," I replied.

"And our arrangement was, I think, quarterly payments, and one month's notice on either side?"

"Yes, sir." I heard my voice tremble, though I could not have said what frightened me.

"Then you will please to take your notice now. Come in before you leave this evening, and I'll pay you three months' salary, and then we shall be quits."

"I don't think I quite understand," I was beginning, when he broke in:

"But I understand, and that's enough. I have had enough of you and your airs, and your indifference, and your insolence here. I never had a clerk I disliked as I do you. Coming and dictating terms, forsooth! No, you shan't go to Ladlow. Many a poor chap"—(he said "devil")—"would have been glad to earn half a guinea, let alone two sovereigns; and perhaps you may be before you are much older."

"Do you mean that you won't keep me here any longer, sir?" I asked in despair. "I had no intention of offending you. I——"

"Now you need not say another word," he interrupted, "for I won't bandy words with you. Since you have been in this place you have never known your position, and you don't seem able to realize it. When I was foolish enough to take you, I did it on the strength of your connections, but your connections have done nothing for me. I have never had a penny out of any one of your friends—if you have any. You'll not do any good in business for yourself or anybody else, and the sooner you go to Australia—(here he was very emphatic)—and get off these premises, the better I shall be pleased."

I did not answer him—I could not. He had worked himself to a white heat by this time, and evidently intended I should leave his premises then and there. He counted five pounds out of his cash-box, and, writing a receipt, pushed it and the money across the table, and bade me sign and be off at once.

My hand trembled so I could scarcely hold the pen, but I had presence of mind enough left to return one pound ten in gold, and three shillings and fourpence I had, quite by the merest good fortune, in my waistcoat pocket.

"I can't take wages for work I haven't done," I said, as well as sorrow and passion would let me. "Good-morning," and I left his office and passed out among the clerks.

I took from my desk the few articles belonging to me, left the papers it contained in order, and then, locking it, asked Parton if he would be so good as to give the key to Mr. Fryer.

"What's up?" he asked "Are you going?"

I said, "Yes, I am going."

"Got the sack?"

"That is exactly what has happened."

"Well, I'm——!" exclaimed Mr. Parton.

I did not stop to hear any further commentary on the matter, but bidding my fellow-clerks goodbye, shook the dust of Frimpton's Estate and Agency Office from off my feet.

I did not like to go home and say I was discharged, so I walked about aimlessly, and at length found myself in Regent Street. There I met my father, looking more worried than usual.

"Do you think, Phil," he said (my name is Theophilus), "you could get two or three pounds from your employers?"

Maintaining a discreet silence regarding what had passed, I answered: "No doubt I could."

"I shall be glad if you will then, my boy," he went on, "for we are badly in want of it."

I did not ask him what was the special trouble. Where would have been the use? There was always something—gas, or water, or poor-rates, or the butcher, or the baker, or the bootmaker.

Well, it did not much matter, for we were well accustomed to the life; but, I thought, "if ever I marry, we will keep within our means." And then there rose up before me a vision of Patty, my cousin—the blithest, prettiest, most useful, most sensible girl that ever made sunshine in poor man's house.

My father and I had parted by this time, and I was still walking aimlessly on, when all at once an idea occurred to me. Mr. Fryer had not treated me well or fairly. I would hoist him on his own petard. I would go to headquarters, and try to make terms with Mr.

Carrison direct.

No sooner thought than done. I hailed a passing omnibus, and was ere long in the heart of the city. Like other great men, Mr. Carrison was difficult of access—indeed, so difficult of access, that the clerk to whom I applied for an audience told me plainly I could not see him at all. I might send in my message if I liked, he was good enough to add, and no doubt it would be attended to. I said I should not send in a message, and was then asked what I would do. My answer was simple. I meant to wait till I did see him. I was told they could not have people waiting about the office in this way.

I said I supposed I might stay in the street. "Carrison didn't own that," I suggested.

The clerk advised me not to try that game, or I might get locked up.

I said I would take my chance of it.

After that we went on arguing the question at some length, and we were in the middle of a heated argument, in which several of Carrison's "young gentlemen", as they called themselves, were good enough to join, when we were all suddenly silenced by a grave-looking individual, who authoritatively enquired:

"What is all this noise about?"

Before anyone could answer I spoke up: "I want to see Mr. Carrison, and they won't let me."

"What do you want with Mr. Carrison?"

"I will tell that to himself only."

"Very well, say on—I am Mr. Carrison."

For a moment I felt abashed and almost ashamed of my persistency; next instant, however, what Mr. Fryer would have called my "native audacity" came to the rescue, and I said, drawing a step or two nearer to him, and taking off my hat:

"I wanted to speak to you about Ladlow Hall, if you please, sir."

In an instant the fashion of his face changed, a look of irritation succeeded to that of immobility; an angry contraction of the eyebrows disfigured the expression of his countenance.

"Ladlow Hall!" he repeated; "and what have you got to say about Ladlow Hall?"

"That is what I wanted to tell you, sir," I answered, and a dead hush seemed to fall on the office as I spoke.

The silence seemed to attract his attention, for he looked sternly at the clerks, who were not using a pen or moving a finger.

"Come this way, then," he said abruptly; and next minute I was in his private office.

"Now, what is it?" he asked, flinging himself into a chair, and addressing me, who stood hat in hand beside the great table in the middle of the room.

I began—I will say he was a patient listener—at the very beginning, and told my story straight through. I concealed nothing. I enlarged on nothing. A discharged clerk I stood before him, and in the capacity of a discharged clerk I said what I had to say. He heard me to the end, then he sat silent, thinking.

At last he spoke.

"You have heard a great deal of conversation about Ladlow, I suppose?" he remarked.

"No sir; I have heard nothing except what I have told you."

"And why do you desire to strive to solve such a mystery?"

"If there is any money to be made, I should like to make it, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Two-and-twenty last January."

"And how much salary had you at Frimpton's?"

"Twenty pounds a year."

"Humph! More than you are worth, I should say."

"Mr. Fryer seemed to imagine so, sir, at any rate," I agreed, sorrowfully.

"But what do you think?" he asked, smiling in spite of himself.

"I think I did quite as much work as the other clerks," I answered.

"That is not saying much, perhaps," he observed. I was of his opinion, but I held my peace.

"You will never make much of a clerk, I am afraid," Mr. Carrison proceeded, fitting his disparaging remarks upon me as he might on a lay figure. "You don't like desk work?"

"Not much, sir."

"I should judge the best thing you could do would be to emigrate," he went on, eyeing me critically.

"Mr. Fryer said I had better go to Australia or——" I stopped, remembering the alternative that gentleman had presented.

"Or where?" asked Mr. Carrison.

"The ——, sir," I explained, softly and apologetically.

He laughed—he lay back in his chair and laughed—and I laughed myself, though ruefully.

After all, twenty pounds was twenty pounds, though I had not thought much of the salary till I lost it.

We went on talking for a long time after that; he asked me all about my father and my early life, and how we lived, and where we lived, and the people we knew; and, in fact, put more questions than I can well remember.

"It seems a crazy thing to do," he said at last; "and yet I feel disposed to trust you. The house is standing perfectly empty. I can't live in it, and I can't get rid of it; all my own furniture I have removed, and there is nothing in the place except a few old-fashioned articles belonging to Lord Ladlow. The place is a loss to me. It is of no use trying to let it, and thus, in fact, matters are at a deadlock. You won't be able to find out anything, I know, because, of course, others have tried to solve the mystery ere now; still, if you like to try you may. I will make this bargain with you. If you like to go down, I will pay your reasonable expenses for a fortnight; and if you do any good for me, I will give you a ten-pound note for yourself. Of course I must be satisfied that what you have told me is true and that you are what you represent. Do you know anybody in the city who would speak for you?"

I could think of no one but my uncle. I hinted to Mr. Carrison he was not grand enough or rich enough, perhaps, but I knew nobody else to whom I could refer him.

"What!" he said, "Robert Dorland, of Cullum Street. He does business with us. If he will go bail for your good behaviour I shan't want any further guarantee. Come along." And to my intense amazement, he rose, put on his hat, walked me across the outer office and along the pavements till we came to Cullum Street.

"Do you know this youth, Mr. Dorland?" he said, standing in front of my uncle's desk, and laying a hand on my shoulder.

"Of course I do, Mr. Carrison," answered my uncle, a little apprehensively; for, as he told me afterwards, he could not imagine what mischief I had been up to. "He is my nephew."

"And what is your opinion of him—do you think he is a young fellow I may safely trust?"

My uncle smiled, and answered, "That depends on what you

wish to trust him with.”

“A long column of addition, for instance.”

“It would be safer to give that task to somebody else.”

“Oh, uncle!” I remonstrated; for I had really striven to conquer my natural antipathy to figures—worked hard, and every bit of it against the collar.

My uncle got off his stool, and said, standing with his back to the empty fire-grate:

“Tell me what you wish the boy to do, Mr. Carrison, and I will tell you whether he will suit your purpose or not. I know him, I believe, better than he knows himself.”

In an easy, affable way, for so rich a man, Mr. Carrison took possession of the vacant stool, and nursing his right leg over his left knee, answered:

“He wants to go and shut the open door at Ladlow for me. Do you think he can do that?”

My uncle looked steadily back at the speaker, and said, “I thought, Mr. Carrison, it was quite settled no one could shut it?”

Mr. Carrison shifted a little uneasily on his seat, and replied: “I did not set your nephew the task he fancies he would like to undertake.”

“Have nothing to do with it, Phil,” advised my uncle, shortly.

“You don’t believe in ghosts, do you, Mr. Dorland?” asked Mr. Carrison, with a slight sneer.

“Don’t you, Mr. Carrison?” retorted my uncle.

There was a pause—an uncomfortable pause—during the course of which I felt the ten pounds, which, in imagination, I had really spent, trembling in the scale. I was not afraid. For ten pounds, or half the money, I would have faced all the inhabitants of spirit land. I longed to tell them so; but something in the way those two men looked at each other stayed my tongue.

“If you ask me the question here in the heart of the city, Mr. Dorland,” said Mr. Carrison, at length, slowly and carefully, “I answer ‘No’; but if you were to put it to me on a dark night at Ladlow, I should beg time to consider. I do not believe in supernatural phenomena myself, and yet—the door at Ladlow is as much beyond my comprehension as the ebbing and flowing of the sea.”

“And you can’t live at Ladlow?” remarked my uncle.

"I can't live at Ladlow, and what is more, I can't get anyone else to live at Ladlow."

"And you want to get rid of your lease?"

"I want so much to get rid of my lease that I told Fryer I would give him a handsome sum if he could induce anyone to solve the mystery. Is there any other information you desire, Mr. Dorland? Because if there is, you have only to ask and have. I feel I am not here in a prosaic office in the city of London, but in the Palace of Truth."

My uncle took no notice of the implied compliment. When wine is good it needs no bush. If a man is habitually honest in his speech and in his thoughts, he desires no recognition of the fact.

"I don't think so," he answered; "it is for the boy to say what he will do. If he be advised by me he will stick to his ordinary work in his employers' office, and leave ghost-hunting and spirit-laying alone."

Mr. Carrison shot a rapid glance in my direction, a glance which, implying a secret understanding, might have influenced my uncle could I have stooped to deceive my uncle.

"I can't stick to my work there any longer," I said. "I got my marching orders today."

"What *had* you been doing, Phil?" asked my uncle.

"I wanted ten pounds to go and lay the ghost!" I answered, so dejectedly, that both Mr. Carrison and my uncle broke out laughing.

"Ten pounds!" cried my uncle, almost between laughing and crying. "Why, Phil boy, I had rather, poor man though I am, have given thee ten pounds than that thou should'st go ghost-hunting or ghost-laying."

When he was very much in earnest my uncle went back to thee and thou of his native dialect. I liked the vulgarism, as my mother called it, and I knew my aunt loved to hear him use the caressing words to her. He had risen, not quite from the ranks it is true, but if ever a gentleman came ready born into the world it was Robert Dorland, upon whom at our home everyone seemed to look down.

"What will you do, Edlyd?" asked Mr. Carrison; "you hear what your uncle says, 'Give up the enterprise', and what I say; I do not want either to bribe or force your inclinations."

"I will go, sir," I answered quite steadily. "I am not afraid, and I

should like to show you—" I stopped. I had been going to say, "I should like to show you I am not such a fool as you all take me for", but I felt such an address would be too familiar, and refrained.

Mr. Carrison looked at me curiously. I think he supplied the end of the sentence for himself, but he only answered:

"I should like you to show me that door fast shut; at any rate, if you can stay in the place alone for a fortnight, you shall have your money."

"I don't like it, Phil," said my uncle: "I don't like this freak at all."

"I am sorry for that, uncle," I answered, "for I mean to go."

"When?" asked Mr. Carrison.

"To-morrow morning," I replied.

"Give him five pounds, Dorland, please, and I will send you my cheque. You will account to me for that sum, you understand," added Mr. Carrison, turning to where I stood.

"A sovereign will be quite enough," I said.

"You will take five pounds, and account to me for it," repeated Mr. Carrison, firmly; "also, you will write to me every day, to my private address, and if at any moment you feel the thing too much for you, throw it up. Good afternoon," and without more formal leave-taking he departed.

"It is of no use talking to you, Phil, I suppose?" said my uncle.

"I don't think it is," I replied; "you won't say anything to them at home, will you?"

"I am not very likely to meet any of them, am I?" he answered, without a shade of bitterness—merely stating a fact.

"I suppose I shall not see you again before I start," I said, "so I will bid you goodbye now."

"Goodbye, my lad; I wish I could see you a bit wiser and steadier."

I did not answer him; my heart was very full, and my eyes too. I had tried, but office-work was not in me, and I felt it was just as vain to ask me to sit on a stool and pore over writing and figures as to think a person born destitute of musical ability could compose an opera.

Of course I went straight to Patty; though we were not then married, though sometimes it seemed to me as if we never should be married, she was my better half then as she is my better half

now.

She did not throw cold water on the project; she did not discourage me. What she said, with her dear face aglow with excitement, was, "I only wish, Phil, I was going with you." Heaven knows, so did I.

Next morning I was up before the milkman. I had told my people overnight I should be going out of town on business. Patty and I settled the whole plan in detail. I was to breakfast and dress there, for I meant to go down to Ladlow in my volunteer garments. That was a subject upon which my poor father and I never could agree; he called volunteering child's play, and other things equally hard to bear; whilst my brother, a very carpet warrior to my mind, was never weary of ridiculing the force, and chaffing me for imagining I was "a soldier".

Patty and I had talked matters over, and settled, as I have said, that I should dress at her father's.

A young fellow I knew had won a revolver at a raffle, and willingly lent it to me. With that and my rifle I felt I could conquer an army.

It was a lovely afternoon when I found myself walking through leafy lanes in the heart of Meadowshire. With every vein of my heart I loved the country, and the country was looking its best just then: grass ripe for the mower, grain forming in the ear, rippling streams, dreamy rivers, old orchards, quaint cottages.

"Oh that I had never to go back to London," I thought, for I am one of the few people left on earth who love the country and hate cities. I walked on, I walked a long way, and being uncertain as to my road, asked a gentleman who was slowly riding a powerful roan horse under arching trees—a gentleman accompanied by a young lady mounted on a stiff white pony—my way to Ladlow Hall.

"That is Ladlow Hall," he answered, pointing with his whip over the fence to my left hand. I thanked him and was going on, when he said: "No one is living there now."

"I am aware of that," I answered.

He did not say anything more, only courteously bade me good-day, and rode off. The young lady inclined her head in acknowledgement of my uplifted cap, and smiled kindly. Altogether I felt pleased, little things always did please me. It was a

good beginning—half-way to a good ending!

When I got to the Lodge I showed Mr. Carrison's letter to the woman, and received the key.

"You are not going to stop up at the Hall alone, are you, sir?" she asked.

"Yes, I am," I answered, uncompromisingly, so uncompromisingly that she said no more.

The avenue led straight to the house; it was uphill all the way, and bordered by rows of the most magnificent limes I ever beheld. A light iron fence divided the avenue from the park, and between the trunks of the trees I could see the deer browsing and cattle grazing. Ever and anon there came likewise to my ear the sound of a sheep-bell.

It was a long avenue, but at length I stood in front of the Hall—a square, solid-looking, old-fashioned house, three stories high, with no basement; a flight of steps up to the principal entrance; four windows to the right of the door, four windows to the left; the whole building flanked and backed with trees; all the blinds pulled down, a dead silence brooding over the place: the sun westering behind the great trees studding the park. I took all this in as I approached, and afterwards as I stood for a moment under the ample porch; then, remembering the business which had brought me so far, I fitted the great key in the lock, turned the handle, and entered Ladlow Hall.

For a minute—stepping out of the bright sunlight—the place looked to me so dark that I could scarcely distinguish the objects by which I was surrounded; but my eyes soon grew accustomed to the comparative darkness, and I found I was in an immense hall, lighted from the roof, a magnificent old oak staircase conducted to the upper rooms.

The floor was of black and white marble. There were two fireplaces, fitted with dogs for burning wood; around the walls hung pictures, antlers, and horns, and in odd niches and corners stood groups of statues, and the figures of men in complete suits of armour.

To look at the place outside, no one would have expected to find such a hall. I stood lost in amazement and admiration, and then I began to glance more particularly around.

Mr. Carrison had not given me any instructions by which to

identify the ghostly chamber—which I concluded would most probably be found on the first floor.

I knew nothing of the story connected with it—if there were a story. On that point I had left London as badly provided with mental as with actual luggage—worse provided, indeed, for a hamper, packed by Patty, and a small bag were coming over from the station; but regarding the mystery I was perfectly unencumbered. I had not the faintest idea in which apartment it resided. Well, I should discover that, no doubt, for myself ere long.

I looked around me—doors—doors—doors—I had never before seen so many doors together all at once. Two of them stood open—one wide, the other slightly ajar.

“I’ll just shut them as a beginning,” I thought, “before I go upstairs.”

The doors were of oak, heavy, well-fitting, furnished with good locks and sound handles. After I had closed I tried them. Yes, they were quite secure. I ascended the great staircase feeling curiously like an intruder, paced the corridors, entered the many bed-chambers—some quite bare of furniture, others containing articles of an ancient fashion, and no doubt of considerable value—chairs, antique dressing-tables, curious wardrobes, and such like. For the most part the doors were closed, and I shut those that stood open before making my way into the attics.

I was greatly delighted with the attics. The windows lighting them did not, as a rule, overlook the front of the Hall, but commanded wide views over wood, and valley, and meadow. Leaning out of one, I could see that to the right of the Hall the ground, thickly planted, shelved down to a stream, which came out into the daylight a little distance beyond the plantation, and meandered through the deer park. At the back of the Hall the windows looked out on nothing save a dense wood and a portion of the stable-yard, whilst on the side nearest the point from whence I had come there were spreading gardens surrounded by thick yew hedges, and kitchen-gardens protected by high walls; and further on a farmyard, where I could perceive cows and oxen, and, further still, luxuriant meadows, and fields glad with waving corn.

“What a beautiful place!” I said. “Carrison must have been a duffer to leave it.” And then I thought what a great ramshackle house it was for anyone to be in all alone.

Getting heated with my long walk, I suppose, made me feel chilly, for I shivered as I drew my head in from the last dormer window, and prepared to go downstairs again.

In the attics, as in the other parts of the house I had as yet explored, I closed the doors, when there were keys locking them; when there were not, trying them, and in all cases, leaving them securely fastened.

When I reached the ground floor the evening was drawing on apace, and I felt that if I wanted to explore the whole house before dusk I must hurry my proceedings.

"I'll take the kitchens next," I decided, and so made my way to a wilderness of domestic offices lying to the rear of the great hall. Stone passages, great kitchens, an immense servants'-hall, larders, pantries, coal-cellars, beer-cellars, laundries, brewhouses, house-keeper's room—it was not of any use lingering over these details.

The mystery that troubled Mr. Carrison could scarcely lodge amongst cinders and empty bottles, and there did not seem much else left in this part of the building. I would go through the living-rooms, and then decide as to the apartments I should occupy myself.

The evening shadows were drawing on apace, so I hurried back into the hall, feeling it was a weird position to be there all alone with those ghostly hollow figures of men in armour, and the statues on which the moon's beams must fall so coldly. I would just look through the lower apartments and then kindle a fire. I had seen quantities of wood in a cupboard close at hand, and felt that beside a blazing hearth, and after a good cup of tea, I should not feel the solitary sensation which was oppressing me.

The sun had sunk below the horizon by this time, for to reach Ladlow I had been obliged to travel by cross lines of railway, and wait besides for such trains as condescended to carry third class passengers; but there was still light enough in the hall to see all objects distinctly. With my own eyes I saw that one of the doors I had shut with my own hands was standing wide!

I turned to the door on the other side of the hall. It was as I had left it—closed. *This, then, was the room—this with the open door.* For a second I stood appalled; I think I was fairly frightened.

That did not last long, however. There lay the work I had desired to undertake, the foe I had offered to fight; so without

more ado I shut the door and tried it.

"Now I will walk to the end of the hall and see what happens," I considered. I did so. I walked to the foot of the grand staircase and back again, and looked.

The door stood wide open.

I went into the room, after just a spasm of irresolution—went in and pulled up the blinds: a good-sized room, twenty by twenty (I knew, because I paced it afterwards), lighted by two long windows.

The floor, of polished oak, was partially covered with a Turkey carpet. There were two recesses beside the fireplace, one fitted up as a bookcase, the other with an old and elaborately caned cabinet. I was astonished also to find a bedstead in an apartment so little retired from the traffic of the house; and there were also some chairs of an obsolete make, covered, so far as I could make out, with faded tapestry. Beside the bedstead, which stood against the wall opposite to the door, I perceived another door. It was fast locked, the only locked door I had as yet met with in the interior of the house. It was a dreary, gloomy room: the dark panelled walls; the black, shining floor; the windows high from the ground; the antique furniture; the dull four-poster bedstead, with dingy velvet curtains; the gaping chimney; the silk counterpane that looked like a pall.

"Any crime might have been committed in such a room," I thought pettishly; and then I looked at the door critically.

Someone had been at the trouble of fitting bolts upon it, for when I passed out I not merely shut the door securely, but bolted it as well.

"I will go and get some wood, and then look at it again," I soliloquized. When I came back it stood wide open once more.

"Stay open, then!" I cried in a fury. "I won't trouble myself any more with you tonight!"

Almost as I spoke the words, there came a ring at the front door. Echoing through the desolate house, the peal in the then state of my nerves startled me beyond expression.

It was only the man who had agreed to bring over my traps. I bade him lay them down in the hall, and, while looking out some small silver, asked where the nearest post-office was to be found. Not far from the park gates, he said; if I wanted any letter sent, he

would drop it in the box for me; the mail-cart picked up the bag at ten o'clock.

I had nothing ready to post then, and told him so. Perhaps the money I gave was more than he expected, or perhaps the dreariness of my position impressed him as it had impressed me, for he paused with his hand on the lock, and asked:

"Are you going to stop here all alone, master?"

"All alone," I answered, with such cheerfulness as was possible under the circumstances.

"That's the room, you know," he said, nodding in the direction of the open door, and dropping his voice to a whisper.

"Yes, I know," I replied.

"What you've been trying to shut it already, have you? Well, you are a game one!" And with this complementary if not very respectful comment he hastened out of the house. Evidently he had no intention of proffering his services towards the solution of the mystery.

I cast one glance at the door—it stood wide open. Through the windows I had left bare to the night, moonlight was beginning to stream cold and silvery. Before I did aught else I felt I must write to Mr. Carrison and Patty, so straightway I hurried to one of the great tables in the hall, and lighting a candle my thoughtful link girl had provided, with many other things, sat down and dashed off the two epistles.

Then down the long avenue, with its mysterious lights and shades, with the moonbeams glinting here and there, playing at hide-and-seek round the boles of the trees and through the tracery of quivering leaf and stem, I walked as fast as if I were doing a march against time.

It was delicious, the scent of the summer odours, the smell of the earth; if it had not been for the door I should have felt too happy. As it was—"Look here, Phil," I said, all of a sudden; "life's not child's play, as uncle truly remarks. That door is just the trouble you have now to face, and you must face it! But for that door you would never have been here. I hope you are not going to turn coward the very first night. Courage!—that is your enemy—conquer it."

"I will try," my other self answered back. "I can but try. I can but fail."

The post-office was at Ladlow Hollow, a little hamlet through which the stream I had remarked dawdling on its way across the park flowed swiftly, spanned by an ancient bridge.

As I stood by the door of the little shop, asking some questions of the postmistress, the same gentleman I had met in the afternoon mounted on his roan horse, passed on foot. He wished me goodnight as he went by, and nodded familiarly to my companion, who curtsied her acknowledgements.

"His lordship ages fast," she remarked, following the retreating figure with her eyes.

"His lordship," I repeated. "Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of Lord Ladlow," she said.

"Oh! I have never seen him," I answered, puzzled.

"Why, *that* was Lord Ladlow!" she exclaimed.

You may be sure I had something to think about as I walked back to the Hall—something beside the moonlight and the sweet night-scents, and the rustle of beast and bird and leaf, that make silence seem more eloquent than noise away down in the heart of the country. Lord Ladlow! my word, I thought he was hundreds, thousands of miles away; and here I find him—he walking in the opposite direction from his own home—I an inmate of his desolate abode. Hi!—what was that? I heard a noise in a shrubbery close at hand, and in an instant I was in the thick of the underwood. Something shot out and darted into the cover of the further plantation. I followed, but I could catch never a glimpse of it. I did not know the lie of the ground sufficiently to course with success, and I had at length to give up the hunt—heated, baffled, and annoyed.

When I got into the house the moon's beams were streaming down upon the hall; I could see every statue, every square of marble, every piece of armour. For all the world it seemed to me like something in a dream; but I was tired and sleepy, and decided I would not trouble about fire or food, or the open door, till the next morning: I would go to sleep.

With this intention I picked up some of my traps and carried them to a room on the first floor I had selected as small and habitable. I went down for the rest, and this time chanced to lay my hand on my rifle.

It was wet. I touched the floor—it was wet likewise.

I never felt anything like the thrill of delight which shot through me. I had to deal with flesh and blood, and I would deal with it, heaven helping me.

The next morning broke clear and bright. I was up with the lark—had washed, dressed, breakfasted, explored the house before the postman came with my letters.

One from Mr. Carrison, one from Patty, and one from my uncle: I gave the man half a crown, I was so delighted, and said I was afraid my being at the Hall would cause him some additional trouble.

“No, sir,” he answered, profuse in his expressions of gratitude; “I pass here every morning on my way to her ladyship’s.”

“Who is her ladyship?” I asked.

“The Dowager Lady Ladlow,” he answered—“the old lord’s widow.”

“And where is her place?” I persisted.

“If you keep on through the shrubbery and across the waterfall, you come to the house about a quarter of a mile further up the stream.”

He departed, after telling me there was only one post a day; and I hurried back to the room in which I had breakfasted, carrying my letters with me.

I opened Mr. Carrison’s first. The gist of it was, ‘Spare no expense; if you run short of money telegraph for it.’

I opened my uncle’s next. He implored me to return; he had always thought me hair-brained, but he felt a deep interest in and affection for me, and thought he could get me a good berth if I would only try to settle down and promise to stick to my work. The last was from Patty. O Patty, God bless you! Such women, I fancy, the men who fight best in battle, who stick last to a sinking ship, who are firm in life’s struggles, who are brave to resist temptation, must have known and loved. I can’t tell you more about the letter, except that it gave me strength to go on to the end.

I spent the forenoon considering that door. I looked at it from within and from without. I eyed it critically. I tried whether there was any reason why it should fly open, and I found that so long as I remained on the threshold it remained closed; if I walked even so far away as the opposite side of the hall, it swung wide.

Do what I would, it burst from latch and bolt. I could not lock

it because there was no key.

Well, before two o'clock I confess I was baffled.

At two there came a visitor—none other than Lord Ladlow himself. Sorely I wanted to take his horse round to the stables, but he would not hear of it.

“Walk beside me across the park, if you will be so kind,” he said; “I want to speak to you.”

We went together across the park, and before we parted I felt I could have gone through fire and water for this simple-spoken nobleman.

“You must not stay here ignorant of the rumours which are afloat,” he said. “Of course, when I let the place to Mr. Carrison I knew nothing of the open door.”

“Did you not, sir?—my lord, I mean,” I stammered.

He smiled. “Do not trouble yourself about my title, which, indeed, carries a very empty state with it, but talk to me as you might to a friend. I had no idea there was any ghost story connected with the Hall, or I should have kept the place empty.”

I did not exactly know what to answer, so I remained silent.

“How did you chance to be sent here?” he asked, after a pause.

I told him. When the first shock was over, a lord did not seem very different from anybody else. If an emperor had taken a morning canter across the park, I might, supposing him equally affable, have spoken as familiarly to him as to Lord Ladlow. My mother always said I entirely lacked the bump of veneration!

Beginning at the beginning, I repeated the whole story, from Parton's remark about the sovereign to Mr. Carrison's conversation with my uncle. When I had left London behind in the narrative, however, and arrived at the Hall, I became somewhat more reticent. After all, it was *his* Hall people could not live in—*his* door that would not keep shut; and it seemed to me these were facts he might dislike being forced upon his attention.

But he would have it. What had *I* seen? What did *I* think of the matter? Very honestly I told him I did not know what to say. The door certainly would not remain shut, and there seemed no human agency to account for its persistent opening; but then, on the other hand, ghosts generally did not tamper with firearms, and my rifle, though not loaded, had been tampered with—I was sure of that.

My companion listened attentively. “You are not frightened, are

you?" he enquired at length.

"Not now," I answered. "The door did give me a start last evening, but I am not afraid of that since I find someone else is afraid of a bullet."

He did not answer for a minute; then he said: "The theory people have set up about the open door is this: As in that room my uncle was murdered, they say the door will never remain shut till the murderer is discovered."

"Murdered!" I did not like the word at all; it made me feel chill and uncomfortable.

"Yes—he was murdered sitting in his chair, and the assassin has never been discovered. At first many persons inclined to the belief that I killed him; indeed, many are of that opinion still."

"But you did not, sir—there is not a word of truth in that story, is there?"

He laid his hand on my shoulder as he said:

"No, my lad; not a word. I loved the old man tenderly. Even when he disinherited me for the sake of his young wife, I was sorry, but not angry; and when he sent for me and assured me he had resolved to repair that wrong, I tried to induce him to leave the lady a handsome sum in addition to her jointure. 'If you do not, people may think she has not been the source of happiness you expected,' I added.

"'Thank you, Hal,' he said. 'You are a good fellow; we will talk further about this tomorrow.' And then he bade me goodnight.

"Before morning broke—it was in the summer two years ago—the household was aroused by a fearful scream. It was his death-cry. He had been stabbed from behind in the neck. He was seated in his chair writing—writing a letter to me. But for that I might have found it harder to clear myself than was in the case; for his solicitors came forward and said he had signed a will leaving all his personalty to me—he was very rich—unconditionally, only three days previously. That, of course, supplied the motive, as my lady's lawyer put it. She was very vindictive, spared no expense in trying to prove my guilt, and said openly she would never rest till she saw justice done, if it cost her the whole of her fortune. The letter lying before the dead man, over which blood had spurted, she declared must have been placed on his table by me; but the coroner saw there was an animus in this, for the few opening lines stated my

uncle's desire to confide in me his reasons for changing his will—reasons, he said, that involved his honour, as they had destroyed his peace. 'In the statement you will find sealed up with my will in——' At that point he was dealt his death-blow. The papers were never found, and the will was never proved. My lady put in the former will, leaving her everything. Ill as I could afford to go to law, I was obliged to dispute the matter, and the lawyers are at it still, and very likely will continue at it for years.

"When I lost my good name, I lost my good health, and had to go abroad; and while I was away Mr. Carrison took the Hall. Till I returned, I never heard a word about the open door. My solicitor said Mr. Carrison was behaving badly; but I think now I must see them or him, and consider what can be done in the affair. As for yourself, it is of vital importance to me that this mystery should be cleared up, and if you are really not timid, stay on. I am too poor to make rash promises, but you won't find me ungrateful."

"Oh, my lord!" I cried—the address slipped quite easily and naturally off my tongue—"I don't want any more money or anything, if I can only show Patty's father I am good for something—"

"Who is Patty?" he asked.

He read the answer in my face, for he said no more.

"Should you like to have a good dog for company?" he enquired after a pause.

I hesitated; then I said: "No, thank you. I would rather watch and hunt for myself."

And as I spoke, the remembrance of that "something" in the shrubbery recurred to me, and I told him I thought there had been someone about the place the previous evening.

"Poachers," he suggested; but I shook my head.

"A girl or a woman I imagine. However, I think a dog might hamper me."

He went away, and I returned to the house. I never left it all day. I did not go into the garden, or the stable-yard, or the shrubbery, or anywhere; I devoted myself solely and exclusively to that door.

If I shut it once, I shut it a hundred times, and always with the same result. Do what I would, it swung wide. Never, however, when I was looking at it. So long as I could endure to remain, it stayed shut—the instant I turned my back, it stood open.

About four o'clock I had another visitor; no other than Lord Ladlow's daughter—the Honourable Beatrice, riding her funny little white pony.

She was a beautiful girl of fifteen or thereabouts, and she had the sweetest smile you ever saw.

"Papa sent me with this," she said; "he would not trust any other messenger," and she put a piece of paper in my hand.

"Keep your food under lock and key; buy what you require yourself. Get your water from the pump in the stable-yard. I am going from home; but if you want anything, go or send to my daughter."

"Any answer?" she asked, patting her pony's neck.

"Tell his lordship, if you please, I will 'keep my powder dry!'" I replied.

"You have made papa look so happy," she said, still patting that fortunate pony.

"If it is in my power, I will make him look happier still, Miss—" and I hesitated, not knowing how to address her.

"Call me Beatrice," she said, with an enchanting grace; then added, slily, "Papa promises me I shall be introduced to Patty ere long," and before I could recover from my astonishment, she had tightened the bit and was turning across the park.

"One moment, please," I cried. "You can do something for me."

"What is it?" and she came back, trotting over the great sweep in front of the house.

"Lend me your pony for a minute."

She was off before I could even offer to help her alight—off, and gathering up her habit dexterously with one hand, led the docile old sheep forward with the other.

I took the bridle—when I was with horses I felt amongst my own kind—stroked the pony, pulled his ears, and let him thrust his nose into my hand.

Miss Beatrice is a countess now, and a happy wife and mother; but I sometimes see her, and the other night she took me carefully into a conservatory and asked:

"Do you remember Toddy, Mr. Edlyd?"

"Remember him!" I exclaimed; "I can never forget him!"

"He is dead!" she told me, and there were tears in her beautiful eyes as she spoke the words.

"Mr. Edlyd, *I loved Toddy!*"

Well, I took Toddy up to the house, and under the third window to the right hand. He was a docile creature, and let me stand on the saddle while I looked into the only room in Ladlow Hall I had been unable to enter.

It was perfectly bare of furniture, there was not a thing in it—not a chair or table, not a picture on the walls, or ornament on the chimney-piece.

"That is where my grand-uncle's valet slept," said Miss Beatrice.

"It was he who first ran in to help him the night he was murdered."

"Where is the valet?" I asked.

"Dead," she answered. "The shock killed him. He loved his master more than he loved himself."

I had seen all I wished, so I jumped off the saddle, which I had carefully dusted with a branch plucked from a lilac tree; between jest and earnest pressed the hem of Miss Beatrice's habit to my lips as I arranged its folds; saw her wave her hand as she went at a hand-gallop across the park; and then turned back once again into the lonely house, with the determination to solve the mystery attached to it or die in the attempt.

Why, I cannot explain, but before I went to bed that night I drove a gimlet I found in the stables hard into the floor, and said to the door:

"Now *I* am keeping you open."

When I went down in the morning the door was close shut, and the handle of the gimlet, broken off short, lying in the hall.

I put my hand to wipe my forehead; it was dripping with perspiration. I did not know what to make of the place at all! I went out into the open air for a few minutes; when I returned the door again stood wide.

If I were to pursue in detail the days and nights that followed, I should weary my readers. I can only say they changed my life. The solitude, the solemnity, the mystery, produced an effect I do not profess to understand, but that I cannot regret.

I have hesitated about writing of the end, but it must come, so let me hasten to it.

Though feeling convinced that no human agency did or could keep the door open, I was certain that some living person had means of access to the house which *I* could not discover. This was made apparent in trifles which might well have escaped unnoticed had several, or even two people occupied the mansion, but that in my solitary position it was impossible to overlook. A chair would be misplaced, for instance; a path would be visible over a dusty floor; my papers I found were moved; my clothes touched—letters I carried about with me, and kept under my pillow at night; still, the fact remained that when I went to the post-office, and while I was asleep, someone did wander over the house. On Lord Ladlow's return I meant to ask him for some further particulars of his uncle's death, and I was about to write to Mr. Carrison and beg permission to have the door where the valet had slept broken open, when one morning, very early indeed, I spied a hairpin lying close beside it.

What an idiot I had been! If I wanted to solve the mystery of the open door, of course I must keep watch in the room itself. The door would not stay wide unless there was a reason for it, and most certainly a hairpin could not have got into the house without assistance.

I made up my mind what I should do—that I would go to the post early, and take up my position about the hour I had hitherto started for Ladlow Hollow. I felt on the eve of a discovery, and longed for the day to pass, that the night might come.

It was a lovely morning; the weather had been exquisite during the whole week, and I flung the hall-door wide to let in the sunshine and the breeze. As I did so, I saw there was a basket on the top step—a basket filled with rare and beautiful fruit and flowers.

Mr. Carrison had let off the gardens attached to Ladlow Hall for the season—he thought he might as well save something out of the fire, he said, so my fare had not been varied with delicacies of that kind. I was very fond of fruit in those days, and seeing a card addressed to me, I instantly selected a tempting peach, and ate it a little greedily perhaps.

I might say I had barely swallowed the last morsel, when Lord Ladlow's caution recurred to me. The fruit had a curious flavour—there was a strange taste hanging about my palate. For a moment,

sky, trees and park swam before my eyes; then I made up my mind what to do.

I smelt the fruit—it had all the same faint odour; then I put some in my pocket—took the basket and locked it away—walked round to the farmyard—asked for the loan of a horse that was generally driven in a light cart, and in less than half an hour was asking in Ladlow to be directed to a doctor.

Rather cross at being disturbed so early, he was at first inclined to pooh-pooh my idea; but I made him cut open a pear and satisfy himself the fruit had been tampered with.

“It is fortunate you stopped at the first peach,” he remarked, after giving me a draught, and some medicine to take back, and advising me to keep in the open air as much as possible. “I should like to retain this fruit and see you again tomorrow.”

We did not think then on how many morrows we should see each other!

Riding across to Ladlow, the postman had given me three letters, but I did not read them till I was seated under a great tree in the park, with a basin of milk and a piece of bread beside me.

Hitherto, there had been nothing exciting in my correspondence. Patty’s epistles were always delightful, but they could not be regarded as sensational; and about Mr. Carrison’s there was a monotony I had begun to find tedious. On this occasion, however, no fault could be found on that score. The contents of his letter greatly surprised me. He said Lord Ladlow had released him from his bargain—that I could, therefore, leave the Hall at once. He enclosed me ten pounds, and said he would consider how he could best advance my interests; and that I had better call upon him at his private house when I returned to London.

“I do not think I shall leave Ladlow yet awhile,” I considered, as I replaced his letter in its envelope. “Before I go I should like to make it hot for whoever sent me that fruit; so unless Lord Ladlow turns me out I’ll stay a little longer.”

Lord Ladlow did not wish me to leave. The third letter was from him.

“I shall return home tomorrow night,” he wrote, “and see you on Wednesday. I have arranged satisfactorily with Mr. Carrison, and as the Hall is my own again, I mean to try to solve the mystery

it contains myself. If you choose to stop and help me to do so, you would confer a favour, and I will try to make it worth your while."

"I will keep watch tonight, and see if I cannot give you some news tomorrow," I thought. And then I opened Patty's letter—the best, dearest, sweetest letter any postman in all the world could have brought me.

If it had not been for what Lord Ladlow said about his sharing my undertaking, I should not have chosen that night for my vigil. I felt ill and languid—fancy, no doubt, to a great degree inducing these sensations. I had lost energy in a most unaccountable manner. The long, lonely days had told upon my spirits—the fidgety feeling which took me a hundred times in the twelve hours to look upon the open door, to close it, and to count how many steps I could take before it opened again, had tried my mental strength as a perpetual blister might have worn away my physical. In no sense was I fit for the task I had set myself, and yet I determined to go through with it. Why had I never before decided to watch in that mysterious chamber? Had I been at the bottom of my heart afraid? In the bravest of us there are depths of cowardice that lurk unsuspected till they engulf our courage.

The day wore on—the long, dreary day; evening approached—the night shadows closed over the Hall. The moon would not rise for a couple of hours more. Everything was still as death. The house had never before seemed to me so silent and so deserted.

I took a light, and went up to my accustomed room, moving about for a time as though preparing for bed; then I extinguished the candle, softly opened the door, turned the key, and put it in my pocket, slipped softly downstairs, across the hail, through the open door. Then I knew I had been afraid, for I felt a thrill of terror as in the dark I stepped over the threshold. I paused and listened—there was not a sound—the night was still and sultry, as though a storm were brewing. Not a leaf seemed moving—the very mice remained in their holes! Noiselessly I made my way to the other side of the room. There was an old-fashioned easy-chair between the bookshelves and the bed; I sat down in it, shrouded by the heavy curtain.

The hours passed—were ever hours so long? The moon rose, came and looked in at the windows, and then sailed away to the west; but not a sound, no, not even the cry of a bird. I seemed to

myself a mere collection of nerves. Every part of my body appeared twitching. It was agony to remain still; the desire to move became a form of torture. Ah! a streak in the sky; morning at last, Heaven be praised! Had ever anyone before so welcomed the dawn? A thrush began to sing—was there ever heard such delightful music? It was the morning twilight, soon the sun would rise; soon that awful vigil would be over, and yet I was no nearer the mystery than before. Hush! what was that? *It had come.* After the hours of watching and waiting; after the long night and the long suspense, it came in a moment.

The locked door opened—so suddenly, so silently, that I had barely time to draw back behind the curtain, before I saw a woman in the room. She went straight across to the other door and closed it, securing it as I saw with bolt and lock. Then just glancing around, she made her way to the cabinet, and with a key she produced shot back the wards. I did not stir, I scarcely breathed, and yet she seemed uneasy. Whatever she wanted to do she evidently was in haste to finish, for she took out the drawers one by one, and placed them on the floor; then, as the light grew better, I saw her first kneel on the floor, and peer into every aperture, and subsequently repeat the same process, standing on a chair she drew forward for the purpose. A slight, lithe woman, not a lady, clad all in black — not a bit of white about her. What on earth could she want? In a moment it flashed upon me—THE WILL AND THE LETTER! SHE IS SEARCHING FOR THEM.

I sprang from my concealment — I had her in my grasp; but she tore herself out of my hands, fighting like a wild-cat: she hit, scratched, kicked, shifting her body as though she had not a bone in it, and at last slipped herself free, and ran wildly towards the door by which she had entered.

If she reached it, she would escape me. I rushed across the room and just caught her dress as she was on the threshold. My blood was up, and I dragged her back: she had the strength of twenty devils, I think, and struggled as surely no woman ever did before.

“I do not want to kill you,” I managed to say in gasps, “but I will if you do not keep quiet.”

“Bah!” she cried; and before I knew what she was doing she had the revolver out of my pocket and fired.

She missed: the ball just glanced off my sleeve. I fell upon her—I can use no other expression, for it had become a fight for life, and no man can tell the ferocity there is in him till he is placed as I was then—fell upon her, and seized the weapon. She would not let it go, but I held her so tight she could not use it. She bit my face; with her disengaged hand she tore my hair. She turned and twisted and slipped about like a snake, but I did not feel pain or anything except a deadly horror lest my strength should give out.

Could I hold out much longer? She made one desperate plunge, I felt the grasp with which I held her slackening; she felt it too, and seizing her advantage tore herself free, and at the same instant fired again blindly, and again missed.

Suddenly there came a look of horror into her eyes—a frozen expression of fear.

“See!” she cried; and flinging the revolver at me, fled.

I saw, as in a momentary flash, that the door I had beheld locked stood wide—that there stood beside the table an awful figure, with uplifted hand—and then I saw no more. I was struck at last; as she threw the revolver at me she must have pulled the trigger, for I felt something like red-hot iron enter my shoulder, and I could but rush from the room before I fell senseless on the marble pavement of the hall.

When the postman came that morning, finding no one stirring, he looked through one of the long windows that flanked the door; then he ran to the farmyard and called for help.

“There is something wrong inside,” he cried. “That young gentleman is lying on the floor in a pool of blood.”

As they rushed round to the front of the house they saw Lord Ladlow riding up the avenue, and breathlessly told him what had happened.

“Smash in one of the windows,” he said; “and go instantly for a doctor.”

They laid me on the bed in that terrible room, and telegraphed for my father. For long I hovered between life and death, but at length I recovered sufficiently to be removed to the house Lord Ladlow owned on the other side of the Hollow.

Before that time I had told him all I knew, and begged him to make instant search for the will.

“Break up the cabinet if necessary,” I entreated, “I am sure the

papers are there.”

And they were. His lordship got his own, and as to the scandal and the crime, one was hushed up and the other remained unpunished. The dowager and her maid went abroad the very morning I lay on the marble pavement at Ladlow Hall—they never returned.

My lord made that one condition of his silence.

Not in Meadowshire, but in a fairer county still, I have a farm which I manage, and make both ends meet comfortably.

Patty is the best wife any man ever possessed—and I—well, I am just as happy if a trifle more serious than of old; but there are times when a great horror of darkness seems to fall upon me, and at such periods I cannot endure to be left alone.

Nut Bush Farm

Chapter One

When I entered upon the tenancy of Nut Bush Farm almost the first piece of news which met me, in the shape of a whispered rumour, was that “something” had been seen in the “long field.”

Pressed closely as to what he meant, my informant reluctantly stated that the “something” took the “form of a man,” and that the wood and the path leading thereto from Whittleby were supposed to be haunted.

Now, all this annoyed me exceedingly. I do not know when I was more put out than by this intelligence. It is unnecessary to say I did not believe in ghosts or anything of that kind, but my wife being a very nervous, impressionable woman, and our only child a delicate weakling, in the habit of crying himself into fits if left alone at night without a candle, I really felt at my wits’ end to imagine what I should do if a story of this sort reached their ears.

And reach them I knew it must if they came to Nut Bush Farm, so the first thing I did when I heard people did not care to venture down the Beech Walk or through the copse, or across the long field after dark, or indeed by day, was to write to say I thought they had both better remain on at my father-in-law’s till I could get the house thoroughly to rights.

After that I lit my pipe and went out for a stroll; when I knocked the ashes out of my pipe and re-entered the sitting-room I had made up my mind. I could not afford to be frightened away from my tenancy. For weal or for woe I must stick to Nut Bush Farm.

It was quite by chance I happened to know anything of the place at first. When I met with that accident in my employers’ service, which they rated far too highly and recompensed with a liberality I never can feel sufficiently grateful for, the doctors told me plainly if I could not give up office work and leave London altogether, they would not give a year’s purchase for my life. Life seemed very sweet to me then—it always has done—but just at period I felt the pleasant hopes of convalescence; and with that

thousand pounds safely banked, I *could* not let it slip away from me.

"Take a farm," advised my father-in-law. "Though people say a farmer's is a bad trade, I know many a man who is making money out of it. Take a farm, and if you want a helping hand to enable you to stand the racket for a year or two, why, you know I am always ready."

I had been bred and born on a farm. My father held something like fifteen hundred acres under the principal landowner in his county, and though it so happened I could not content myself at home, but must needs come up to London to see the lions and seek my fortune, still I had never forgotten the meadows and the cornfields, and the cattle, and the orchards, and the woods and the streams, amongst which my happy boyhood had been spent. Yes, I thought I should like a farm—one not too far from London; and "not too big," advised my wife's father.

"The error people make nowadays," he went on, "is spreading their butter over too large a surface. It is the same in business as in land—they stretch their arms out too far—they will try to wade in deep waters—and the consequence is they know a day's peace, and end mostly in the bankruptcy court."

He spoke as one having authority, and I knew what he said was quite right. He had made his money by a very different course of procedure, and I felt I could not follow a better example.

I knew something about farming, though not very much. Still, agriculture is like arithmetic: when once one knows the multiplication table the rest is not so difficult. I had learned unconsciously the alphabet of soils and crops and stock when I was an idle young dog, and liked nothing better than talking to the labourers, and accompanying the woodman when he went out felling trees; and so I did not feel much afraid of what the result would be, more especially as I had a good business head on my shoulders, and enough money to "stand the racket," as my father-in-law put it, till the land began to bring in her increase.

When I got strong and well again after my long illness—I mean strong and well enough to go about—I went down to look at a farm which was advertised as to let in Kent.

According to the statement in the newspaper, there was no charm that farm lacked; when I saw it I discovered the place did not possess one virtue, unless, indeed, an old Tudor house fast

falling to ruins, which would have proved invaluable to an artist, could be so considered. Far from a railway, having no advantages of water carriage, remote from a market, apparently destitute of society. Nor could these drawbacks be accounted the worst against it. The land, poor originally, seemed to have been totally exhausted. There were fields on which I do not think a goose could have found subsistence—nothing grew luxuriantly save weeds; it would have taken all my capital to get the ground clean. Then I saw the fences were dilapidated, the hedges in a deplorable condition, and the farm buildings in such a state of decay I would not have stabled a donkey in one of them.

Clearly, the King's Manor, which was the modest name of the place, would not do at any price, and yet I felt sorry, for the country around was beautiful, and already the sweet, pure air seemed to have braced up my nerves and given me fresh energy. Talking to mine host at the "Bunch of Hops," in Whittleby, he advised me to look over the local paper before returning to London.

"There be a many farms vacant," he said, "mayhap you'll light on one to suit."

To cut a long story short, I did look in the local paper and found many farms to let, but not one to suit. There was a drawback to each—a drawback at least so far as I was concerned. I felt determined I would not take a large farm. My conviction was then what my conviction still remains, that it is better to cultivate fifty acres thoroughly than to crop, stock, clean, and manure a hundred insufficiently. Besides, I did not want to spend my strength on wages, or take a place so large I could not oversee the workmen on foot. For all these reasons and many more I came reluctantly to the conclusion that there was nothing in that part of the country to suit a poor unspeculative plodder like myself.

It was a lovely afternoon in May when I turned my face towards Whittleby, as I thought, for the last time. In the morning I had taken train for a farm some ten miles distant and worked my way back on foot to a "small cottage with land" a local agent thought might suit me. But neither the big place nor the little answered my requirements much to the disgust of the auctioneer, who had himself accompanied us to the cottage under the impression I would immediately purchase it and so secure his commission.

Somewhat sulkily he told me a short cut back to Whittleby, and

added, as a sort of rider to all previous statements, the remark:

“You had best look out for what you want in Middlesex. You’ll find nothing of that sort hereabouts.”

As to the last part of the foregoing sentence I was quite of his opinion, but I felt so oppressed with the result of all my wanderings that I thought upon the whole I had better abandon my search altogether, or else pursue it in some county very far away indeed—perhaps in the land of dreams for that matter!

As has been said, it was a lovely afternoon in May—the hedges were snowy with hawthorn blossom, the chestnuts were bursting into flower, the birds were singing fit to split their little throats, the lambs were dotting the hillsides, and I—ah, well, I was a boy again, able to relish all the rich banquet God spreads out day by day for the delight and nourishment of His too often thankless children.

When I came to a point halfway up some rising ground where four lanes met and then wound off each on some picturesque diverse way, I paused to look around regretfully.

As I did so—some distance below me—along what appeared to be a never-before-traversed lane, I saw the gleam of white letters on a black board.

“Come,” I thought, “I’ll see what this is at all events,” and bent my steps towards the place, which might, for all I knew about it, have been a ducal mansion or a cockney’s country villa.

The board appeared modestly conspicuous in the foreground of a young fir plantation, and simply bore this legend:

TO BE LET, HOUSE AND LAND,
Apply at the “White Dragon”

“It is a mansion,” I thought, and I walked on slowly, disappointed. All of a sudden the road turned a sharp corner and I came in an instant upon the prettiest place I had ever seen or ever desire to see.

I looked at it over a low laurel hedge growing inside an open paling about four feet high. Beyond the hedge there was a strip of turf, green as emeralds, smooth as a bowling green—then came a sunk fence, the most picturesque sort of protection the ingenuity

of man ever devised; beyond that, a close-cut lawn which sloped down to the sunk fence from a house with projecting gables in the front, the recessed portion of the building having three windows on the first floor. Both gables were covered with creepers, the lawn was girt in by a semicircular sweep of forest trees; the afternoon sun streamed over the grass and tinted the swaying foliage with a thousand tender lights. Hawthorn bushes, pink and white, mingled with their taller and grander brothers. The chestnuts here were in flower, the copper beech made a delightful contrast of colour, and a birch rose delicate and graceful close beside.

It was like a fairy scene. I passed my hand across my eyes to assure myself it was all real. Then I thought "if this place be even nearly within my means I will settle here. My wife will grow stronger in this paradise—my boy get more like other lads. Such things as nerves must be unknown where there is not a sight or sound to excite them. Nothing but health, purity, and peace."

Thus thinking, I tore myself away in search of the "White Dragon," the landlord of which small public-house sent a lad to show me over the farm.

"As for the rent," he said, "you will have to speak to Miss Gostock herself—she lives at Chalmont, on the road between here and Whittleby."

In every respect the place suited me; it was large enough, but not too large; had been well farmed, and was amply supplied with water—a stream indeed flowing through it; a station was shortly to be opened, at about half-a-mile's distance; and most of the produce could be disposed of to dealers and tradesmen at Crayshell, a town to which the communication by rail was direct.

I felt so anxious about the matter, it was quite a disappointment to find Miss Gostock from home. Judging from the look of her house, I did not suppose she could afford to stick out for a long rent, or to let a farm lie idle for any considerable period. The servant who appeared in answer to my summons was a singularly red armed and rough handed Phyllis. There was only a strip of carpeting laid down in the hall, the windows were bare of draperies, and the avenue gate, set a little back from the main road, was such as I should have felt ashamed to put in a farmyard.

Next morning I betook myself to Chalmont, anxiously wonder-

ing as I walked along what the result of my interview would prove.

When I neared the gate, to which uncomplimentary reference has already been made, I saw standing on the other side a figure wearing a man's broad-brimmed straw hat, a man's coat, and a woman's skirt.

I raised my hat in deference to the supposed sex of this stranger. She put up one finger to the brim of hers, and said, "Servant, sir."

Not knowing exactly what to do, I laid my hand upon the latch of the gate and raised it, but she did not alter her position in the least.

She only asked, "What do you want?"

"I want to see Miss Gostock," was my answer.

"I am Miss Gostock," she said; "what is your business with me?"

I replied meekly that I had come to ask the rent of Nut Bush Farm.

"Have you viewed it?" she inquired.

"Yes." I told her I had been over the place on the previous afternoon.

"And have you a mind to take it?" she persisted. "For I am not going to trouble myself answering a lot of idle inquiries."

So far from my being an idle inquirer, I assured the lady that if we could come to terms about the rent, I should be very glad indeed to take the farm. I said I had been searching the neighbourhood within a circuit of ten miles for some time unsuccessfully, and added, somewhat unguardedly, I suppose, Nut Bush Farm was the only place I had met with which at all met my views.

Standing in an easy attitude, with one arm resting on the top bar of the gate and one foot crossed over the other, Miss Gostock surveyed me, who had unconsciously taken up a similar position, with an amused smile.

"You must think me a very honest person, young man," she remarked.

I answered that I hoped she was, but I had not thought at all about the matter.

"Or else," proceeded this extraordinary lady, "you fancy I am a much greater flat than I am."

"On the contrary," was my reply. "If there be one impression

stronger than another which our short interview has made upon me it is that you are a wonderfully direct and capable woman of business."

She looked at me steadily, and then closed one eye, which performance, done under the canopy of that broad-brimmed straw hat, had the most ludicrous effect imaginable.

"You won't catch me napping," she observed, "but, however, as you seem to mean dealing, come in; I can tell you my terms in two minutes," and opening the gate—a trouble she would not allow me to take off her hands—she gave me admission.

Then Miss Gostock took off her hat, and swinging it to and fro began slowly walking up the ascent leading to Chalmont, I beside her.

"I have quite made up my mind," she said, "not to let the farm again without a premium; my last tenant treated me abominably."

I intimated I was sorry to hear that, and waited for further information.

"He had the place at a low rent—a very low rent. He should not have got it so cheap but for his covenanting to put so much money in the soil; and well—I'm bound to say he acted fair so far as that—he fulfilled that part of his contract. Nearly two years ago we had a bit of a quarrel about—well, it's no matter what we fell out over—only the upshot of the affair was he gave me due notice to leave at last winter quarter. At that time he owed about a year-and-a-half's rent—for he was a man who never could bear parting with money—and like a fool I did not push him for it. What trick do you suppose he served me for my pains?"

It was simply impossible for me to guess, so I did not try.

"On the twentieth of December," went on Miss Gostock, turning her broad face and curly grey hair—she wore her hair short like a man—towards me, "he went over to Whittleby, drew five thousand pounds out of the bank, was afterwards met going towards home by a gentleman named Waite, a friend of his. Since then he has never been seen nor heard of."

"Bless my soul!" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"You may be very sure I did not bless his soul," she snarled out angrily. "The man bolted with the five thousand pounds, having previously sold off all his stock and the bulk of his produce, and when I distrained for my rent, which I did pretty smart, I can tell

you, there was scarce enough on the premises to pay the levy.”

“But what in the world made him bolt?” I asked, quite unconsciously adopting Miss Gostock’s expressive phrase; “as he had so much money, why did he not pay you your rent?”

“Ah! Why, indeed?” mocked Miss Gostock. “Young sir, I am afraid you are a bit of a humbug, or you would have suggested at once there was a pretty girl at the bottom of the affair. He left his wife and children, and me—all in the lurch—and went off with a slip of a girl, whom I once took, thinking to train up as a better sort of servant, but was forced to discharge. Oh, the little hussy!”

Somehow I did not fancy I wanted to hear anything more about her late tenant and the pretty girl, and consequently ventured to inquire how that gentleman’s defalcations bore upon the question of the rent I should have to pay.

“I tell you directly,” she said, and as we had by this time arrived at the house, she invited me to enter, and led the way into an old-fashioned parlour that must have been furnished about the time chairs and tables were first invented and which did not contain a single feminine belonging—not even a thimble.

“Sit down,” she commanded, and I sat. “I have quite made up my mind,” she began, “not to let the farm again, unless I get a premium sufficient to insure me against the chances of possible loss. I mean to ask a very low rent and—a premium.”

“And what amount of premium do you expect?” I inquired, doubtfully.

“I want ——” and here Miss Gostock named a sum which fairly took my breath away.

“In that case,” I said as soon as I got it again, “it is useless to prolong this interview; I can only express my regret for having intruded, and wish you good morning.” And arising, I was bowing myself out when she stopped me.

“Don’t be so fast,” she cried, “I only said what I wanted. Now what are you prepared to give?”

“I can’t be buyer and seller too,” I answered, repeating a phrase the precise meaning of which, it may here be confessed, I have never been able exactly to understand.

“Nonsense,” exclaimed Miss Gostock—I am really afraid the lady used a stronger term—“if you are anything of a man of business, fit at all to commence farming, you must have an idea on

the subject. You shall have the land at a pound an acre, and you will give me for premium—come, how much?”

By what mental process I instantly jumped to an amount it would be impossible to say, but I did mention one which elicited from Miss Gostock the remark:

“That won’t do at any price.”

“Very well, then,” I said, “we need not talk any more about the matter.”

“But what *will* you give?” asked the lady.

“I have told you,” was my answer, “and I am not given either to haggling or beating down.”

“You won’t make a good farmer,” she observed.

“If a farmer’s time were of any value, which it generally seems as if it were not,” I answered, “he would not waste it in splitting a sixpence.”

She laughed, and her laugh was not musical.

“Come now,” she said, “make another bid.”

“No,” I replied, “I have made one and that is enough. I won’t offer another penny.”

“Done then,” cried Miss Gostock, “I accept your offer—we’ll just sign a little memorandum of agreement, and the formal deeds can be prepared afterwards. You’ll pay a deposit, I suppose?”

I was so totally taken aback by her acceptance of my offer I could only stammer out I was willing to do anything that might be usual.

“It does not matter much whether it is usual or not,” she said; “either pay it or I won’t keep the place for you. I am not going to have my land lying idle and my time taken up for your pleasure.”

“I have no objection to paying you a deposit,” I answered.

“That’s right,” she exclaimed; “now if you will just hand me over the writing-desk we can settle the matter, so far as those thieves of lawyers will let us, in five minutes.”

Like one in a dream I sat and watched Miss Gostock while she wrote. Nothing about the transaction seemed to me real. The farm itself resembled nothing I had ever before seen with my waking eyes, and Miss Gostock appeared to me but as some monstrous figure in a story of giants and hobgoblins. The man’s coat, the woman’s skirt, the hobnailed shoes, the grisly hair, the old straw hat, the bare, unfurnished room, the bright sunshine outside, all

struck me as mere accessories in a play—as nothing which had any hold on the outside, everyday world.

It was drawn—we signed our names. I handed Miss Gostock over a cheque. She locked one document in an iron box let into the wall, and handed me the other, adding, as a rider, a word of caution about “keeping it safe and taking care it was not lost.”

Then she went to a corner cupboard, and producing a square decanter half full of spirits, set that and two tumblers on the table.

“You don’t like much water, I suppose,” she said, pouring out a measure which frightened me.

“I could not touch it, thank you, Miss Gostock,” I exclaimed; “I dare not do so; I should never get back to Whittleby.”

For answer she only looked at me contemptuously and said, “D—d nonsense.”

“No nonsense, indeed,” I persisted; “I am not accustomed to anything of that sort.”

Miss Gostock laughed again, then crossing to the sideboard she returned with a jug of water, a very small portion of the contents of which she mixed with the stronger liquor, and raised the glass to her lips.

“To your good health and prosperity,” she said, and in one instant the fiery potion was swallowed.

“You’ll mend of all that,” she remarked, as she laid down her glass, and wiped her lips in the simplest manner by passing the back of her hand over them.

“I hope not, Miss Gostock,” I ventured to observe.

“Why, you look quite shocked,” she said; “did you never see a lady take a mouthful of brandy before?”

I ventured to hint that I had not, more particularly so early in the morning.

“Pooh!” she said. “Early in the morning or late at night, where’s the difference? However, there was a time when I—but that was before I had come through so much trouble. Good-bye for the present, and I hope we shall get on well together.”

I answered I trusted we should, and was half-way to the hall-door, when she called me back.

“I forgot to ask you if you were married,” she said.

“Yes, I have been married some years,” I answered.

“That’s a pity,” she remarked, and dismissed me with a wave of

her hand.

“What on earth would have happened had I not been married?” I considered as I hurried down the drive. “Surely she never contemplated proposing to me herself? But nothing she could do would surprise me.”

Chapter Two

There were some repairs I had mentioned it would be necessary to have executed before I came to live at Nut Bush Farm, but when I found Miss Gostock intended to do them herself — nay, was doing them all herself—I felt thunderstruck.

On one memorable occasion I came upon her with a red handkerchief tied round her head, standing at a carpenter’s bench in a stable yard, planing away, under a sun which would have killed anybody but a negro or my landlady.

She painted the gates, and put sash lines in some of the windows; she took off the locks, oiled, and replaced them; she mowed the lawn, and offered to teach me how to mow; and lastly, she showed me a book where she charged herself and paid herself for every hour’s work done.

“I’ve made at least twenty pounds out of your place,” she said triumphantly. “Higgs at Whittleby would not have charged me a halfpenny less for the repairs. The tradesmen here won’t give me a contract—they say it is just time thrown away, but I know that would have been about his figure. Well, the place is ready for you now, and if you take my advice, you’ll get your grass up as soon as possible. It’s a splendid crop, and if you hire hands enough, not a drop of rain need spoil it. If this weather stands you might cut one day and carry the next.”

I took her advice, and stacked my hay in magnificent condition. Miss Gostock was good enough to come over and superintend the building of the stack, and threatened to split one man’s head open with the pitchfork, and proposed burying another—she called him a “lazy blackguard”—under a pile of hay.

“I will say this much for Hascot,” she remarked, as we stood together beside the stream; “he was a good farmer; where will you see better or cleaner land? A pattern I call it—and to lose his

whole future for the sake of a girl like Sally Powner; leaving his wife and children on the parish, too!"

"You don't mean that?" I said.

"Indeed I do. They are all at Crayshill. The authorities did talk of shifting them, but I know nothing about what they have done."

I stood appalled. I thought of my own poor wife and the little lad, and wondered if any Sally on the face of the earth could make me desert them.

"It has given the place a bad sort of name," remarked Miss Gostock, looking at me sideways: "but, of course, that does not signify anything to you."

"Oh, of course not," I agreed.

"And don't you be minding any stories; there are always a lot of stories going about places."

I said I did not mind stories. I had lived too long in London to pay much attention to them.

"That's right," remarked Miss Gostock, and negating my offer to see her home she started off to Chalmont.

It was not half an hour after her departure when I happened to be walking slowly round the meadows, from which the newly mown hay had been carted, that I heard the rumour which vexed me—"Nut Bush Farm haunted." I thought, "I said the whole thing was too good to last."

"What, Jack, lost in reverie?" cried my sister, who had some up from Devonshire to keep me company, and help to get the furniture a little to rights, entering at the moment, carrying lights; "supper will be ready in a minute, and you can dream as much as you like after you have had something to eat."

I did not say anything to her about my trouble, which was then indeed no bigger than a man's hand, but which grew and grew till it attained terrible proportions.

What was I to do with my wife and child? I never could bring them to a place reputed to be haunted. All in vain I sauntered up and down the Beech Walk night after night; walked through the wood—as a rule selected that route when I went to Whittleby. It did not produce the slightest effect. Not a farm servant but eschewed that path town-ward; not a girl but preferred spending her Sunday at home rather than venture under the interlacing branches of the beech trees, or through the dark recesses of the

wood.

It was becoming serious—I did not know what to do.

One wet afternoon Lolly came in draggled but beaming.

“I’ve made a new acquaintance, Jack,” she said; “a Mrs. Waite—such a nice creature, but in dreadfully bad health. It came on to rain when I was coming home, and so I took refuge under a great tree at the gate of a most picturesque old house. I had not stood there long before a servant with an umbrella appeared at the porch to ask if I would not please to walk in until the storm abated. I waited there ever so long, and we had such a pleasant talk. She is a most delightful woman, with a melancholy, pathetic sort of expression that has been haunting me ever since. She apologised for not having called—said she was not strong and could not walk so far. They keep no conveyance she can drive. Mr. Waite, who is not at home at present, rides into Whittleby when anything is wanted.

“I hoped she would not think of standing on ceremony with me. I was only a farmer’s daughter, and accustomed to plain, homely ways, and I asked her if I might walk round and bid her good-bye before I went home.”

“You must not go home yet, Lolly,” I cried, alarmed; “what in the world should I do without you?”

“Well, you would be a lonely boy,” she answered, complacently, “with no one to sew on a button or darn your socks, or make you eat or go to bed, or do anything you ought to do.”

I had not spoken a word to her about the report which was troubling me, and I knew there must be times when she wondered why I did not go up to London and fetch my wife and child to enjoy the bright summer-time; but Lolly was as good as gold, and never asked me a question, or even indirectly inquired if Lucy and I had quarrelled, as many another sister might.

She was as pleasant and fresh to look upon as a spring morning, with her pretty brown hair smoothly braided, her cotton or muslin dresses never soiled or crumpled, but as nice as though the laundress had that moment sent them home—a rose in her belt and her hands never idle—for ever busy with curtain or blind, or something her housewifely eyes thought had need of making or mending.

About ten days after that showery afternoon when she found

shelter under Mr. Waite's hospitable roof, I felt surprised when, entering the parlour a few minutes before our early dinner, I found Lolly standing beside one of the windows apparently hopelessly lost in the depths of a brown study.

"Why, Lolly," I exclaimed, finding she took no notice of me, "where have you gone to now? A penny for your thoughts, young lady."

"They are not worth a penny," she said, and turning from the window took some work and sat down at a little distance from the spot where I was standing.

I was so accustomed to women, even the best and gayest of them, having occasional fits of temper or depression—times when silence on my part seemed the truest wisdom—that, taking no notice of my sister's manner, I occupied myself with the newspaper till dinner was announced.

During the progress of that meal she talked little and ate still less, but when I was leaving the room, in order to go out to a field of barley where the reapers were at work, she asked me to stop a moment.

"I want to speak to you, Jack," she said.

"Speak, then," I answered, with that lack of ceremony which obtains amongst brothers and sisters.

She hesitated for a moment, but did not speak.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Lolly?" I exclaimed. "Are you sick, or cross, or sorry, or what?"

"If it must be one of the four," she answered, with a dash of her usual manner, "it is 'or what,' Jack," and she came close up to where I stood and took me sorrowfully by the button-hole.

"Well?" I said, amused, for this had always been a favourite habit of Lolly's when she wanted anything from one of the males of her family.

"Jack, you won't laugh at me?"

"I feel much more inclined to be cross with you," I answered. "What are you beating about the bush for, Lolly?"

She lifted her fair face a moment and I saw she was crying.

"Lolly, Lolly!" I cried, clasping her to my heart, "what is it, dear? Have you bad news from home, or have you heard anything about Lucy or the boy? Don't keep me in suspense, there's a darling. No matter what has happened, let me know the worst."

She smiled through her tears, and Lolly has the rarest smile. It quieted my anxious heart in a moment, even before she said:

“No, Jack—it is nothing about home, or Lucy, or Teddy, but—but—but—” and then she relinquished her hold on the button-hole, and fingered each button on the front of my coat carefully and lingeringly. “Did you ever hear—Jack—anybody say anything about this place?”

I knew in a moment what she meant; I knew the cursed tattle had reached her ears, but I only asked: “What sort of thing, Lolly?”

She did not answer me; instead, she put another question.

“Is that the reason you have not brought Lucy down?”

I felt vexed—but I had so much confidence in her good sense, I could not avoid answering without a moment’s delay.

“Well, yes; I do not want her to come till this foolish report has completely died away.”

“Are you quite sure it is a foolish report?” she inquired.

“Why, of course; it could not be anything else.”

She did not speak immediately, then all at once:

“Jack,” she said, “I must tell you something. Lock the door that we may not be interrupted.”

“No,” I answered; “come into the barley field. Don’t you remember Mr. Fenimore Cooper advised, if you want to talk secrets, choose the middle of a plain?”

I tried to put a good face on the matter, but the sight of Lolly’s tears, the sound of Lolly’s doleful voice, darkened my very heart. What had she to tell me which required locked doors or the greater privacy of a half-reaped barley field. I could trust my sister—she was no fool—and I felt perfectly satisfied that no old woman’s story had wrought the effect produced on her.

“Now, Lolly,” I said, as we paced side by side along the top of the barley field in a solitude all the more complete because life and plenty of it was close at hand.

“You know what they say about the place, Jack?”

This was interrogative, and so I answered. “Well, no, Lolly, I can’t say that I do, for the very good reason that I have always refused to listen to the gossip. What do they say?”

“That a man haunts the Beech Walk, the long meadow, and the wood.”

“Yes, I have heard that,” I replied.

“And they say further, the man is Mr. Hascot, the late tenant.”

“But he is not dead,” I exclaimed; “how, then, can they see his ghost?”

“I cannot tell. I know nothing but what I saw this morning. After breakfast I went to Whittleby, and as I came back I observed a man before me on the road. Following him, I noticed a curious thing, that none of the people he met made way for him or he for them. He walked straight on, without any regard to the persons on the side path, and yet no one seemed to come into collision with him. When I reached the field path I saw him going on still at the same pace. He did not look to right or left, and did not seem to walk — the motion was gliding——”

“Yes, dear.”

“He went on, and so did I, till we reached the hollow where the nut-bushes grow, then he disappeared from sight. I looked down among the trees, thinking I should be able to catch a glimpse of his figure through the underwood, but no, I could see no signs of him, neither could I hear any. Everything was as still as death; it seemed to me that my ear had a spell of silence laid upon it.”

“And then?” I asked hoarsely, as she paused.

“Why, Jack, I walked on and crossed the little footbridge and was just turning into the Beech Walk when the same man bustled suddenly across my path, so close to me if I had put out my hands I could have touched him. I drew back, frightened for a minute, then, as he had not seemed to see me, I turned and looked at him as he sped along down the little winding path to the wood.

I thought he must be some silly creature, some harmless sort of idiot, to be running here and there without any apparent object. All at once, as he neared the wood, he stopped, and, half wheeling round, beckoned to me to follow him.”

“You did not, Lolly?”

“No, I was afraid. I walked a few steps quietly till I got among the beech trees and so screened from sight, and then I began to run. I could not run fast, for my knees trembled under me; but still I did run as far nearly as that seat round the ‘Priest’s Tree.’ I had not got quite up to the seat when I saw a man rise from it and stand upright as if waiting for me. *It was the same person, Jack!* I recognised him instantly, though I had not seen his face clearly before. He stood quiet for a moment, and then, with the same

gliding motion, silently disappeared.”

“Someone must be playing a very nice game about Nut Bush Farm,” I exclaimed.

“Perhaps so, dear,” she said doubtfully.

“Why, Lolly, you don’t believe it was a ghost you met in the broad daylight?” I cried incredulously.

“I don’t think it was a living man, Jack,” she answered.

“Living or dead, he dare not bring himself into close quarters with me,” was my somewhat braggart remark. “Why, Lolly, I have walked the ground day after day and night after night in the hope of seeing your friend, and not a sign of an intruder, in the flesh or out of it, could I find. Put the matter away, child, and don’t ramble in that direction again. If I can ascertain the name of the person who is trying to frighten the household and disgust me with Nut Bush Farm he shall go to jail if the magistrates are of my way of thinking. Now, as you have told me this terrible story, and we have reduced your great mountain to a molehill, I will walk back with you to the house.”

She did not make any reply: we talked over indifferent matters as we paced along. I went with her into the pleasant sunshiny drawing-room and looked her out a book and made her promise to read something amusing; then I was going, when she put up her lips for me to kiss her, and said—“Jack, you won’t run any risks?”

“Risks — pooh, you silly little woman!” I answered; and so left my sister and repaired to the barley field once more.

When it was time for the men to leave off work I noticed that one after another began to take a path leading immediately to the main road, which was a very circuitous route to the hamlet, where most of them had either cottages or lodgings.

I noticed this for some time, and then asked a brawny young fellow.

“Why don’t you go home through the Beech Walk? It is not above half the distance.”

He smiled and made some almost unintelligible answer.

“Why are you all afraid of taking the shortest way,” I remarked, “seeing there are enough of you to put half a dozen ghosts to the rout?”

“Likely, sir,” was the answer; “but the old master was a hard man living, and there is not many would care to meet him dead.”

“What old master?” I inquired.

“Mr. Hascot: it’s him as walks. I saw him as plain as I see you now, sir, one moonlight night, just this side of the wood, and so did Nat Tyler and James Monsey, and James Monsey’s father—wise Ben.”

“But Mr. Hascot is not dead; how can he ‘walk,’ as you call it?” was my natural exclamation.

“If he is living, then, sir, where is he?” asked the man. “There is nobody can tell that, and there is a many, especially just lately, think he must have been made away with. He had a cruel lot of money about him—where is all that money gone to?”

The fellow had waxed quite earnest in his interrogations, and really for the first time the singularity of Mr. Hascot’s disappearance seemed to strike me.

I said, after an instant’s pause, “The money is wherever he is. He went off with some girl, did he not?”

“It suited the old people to say so,” he answered; “but there is many a one thinks they know more about the matter than is good for them. I can’t help hearing, and one of the neighbours did say Mrs. Ockfield was seen in church last Sunday with a new dress on and a shawl any lady might have worn.”

“And who is Mrs. Ockfield?” I inquired.

“Why, Sally Powner’s grandmother. The old people treated the girl shameful while she was with them, and now they want to make her out no better than she should be.”

And with a wrathful look the young man, who I subsequently discovered had long been fond of Sally, took up his coat and his tin bottle and his sickle, and with a brief “I think I’ll be going, sir; good night,” departed.

It was easy to return to the house, but I found it impossible to shake the effect produced by this dialogue off my mind. For the first time I began seriously to consider the manner of Mr. Hascot’s disappearance, and more seriously still commenced trying to piece together the various hints I had received as to his character.

A hard man—a hard master, all I ever heard speak considered him, but just, and in the main not unkind. He had sent coals to one widow, kept a poor old labourer off the parish, and then in a minute, for the sake of a girl’s face, left his own wife and children to the mercy of nearest Union.

As I paced along it seemed to me monstrous, and yet how did it happen that till a few minutes previously I had never heard even a suspicion of foul play?

Was it not more natural to conclude the man must have been made away with, than that, in one brief day, he should have changed his nature and the whole current of his former life?

Upon the other hand, people must have had some strong reason for imagining he was gone off with Miss Powner. The notion of a man disappearing in this way—vanishing as if the earth had opened to receive him and closed again—for the sake of any girl, however attractive, was too unnatural an idea for anyone to have evolved out of his internal consciousness. There must have been some substratum of fact, and then, upon the other hand, there seemed to me more than a substratum of possibility in the theory started of his having been murdered.

Supposing he had been murdered, I went on to argue, what then? Did I imagine he “walked”? Did I believe he could not rest wherever he was laid?

Pooh—nonsense! It might be that the murderer haunted the place of his crime—that he hovered about to see if his guilt were still undetected, but as to anything in the shape of a ghost tenanting the Beech Walk, long meadow, and wood, I did not believe it—I could not, and I added, “if I saw it with my own eyes, I would not.”

Having arrived at which decided and sensible conclusion, I went in to supper.

Usually a sound sleeper, I found it impossible that night when I lay down to close my eyes. I tossed and turned, threw off the bedclothes under the impression I was too hot and drew them tight up round me the next instant, feeling cold. I tried to think of my crops, of my land, of my wife, of my boy, of my future—all in vain. A dark shadow, a wall-like night stood between me and all the ordinary interests of my life—I could not get the notion of Mr. Hascot’s strange disappearance out of my mind. I wondered if there was anything about the place which made it in the slightest degree probable I should ever learn to forget the wife who loved, the boy who was dependent on me. Should I ever begin to think I might have done better as regards my choice of a wife, that it would be nicer to have healthy merry children than my affectionate

delicate lad?

When I got to this point, I could stand it no longer. I felt as though some mocking spirit were taking possession of me, which eventually would destroy all my peace of mind, if I did not cast it out promptly and effectually.

I would not lie there supine to let any demon torment me; and, accordingly, springing to the floor, I dressed in hot haste, and flinging wide the window, looked out over a landscape bathed in the clear light of a most lovely moon.

“How beautiful!” I thought. “I have never yet seen the farm by night, I’ll just go and take a stroll round it and then turn in again — after a short walk I shall likely be able to sleep.”

So saying, I slipped downstairs, closed the hall door softly after me, and went out into the moonlight.

Chapter Three

As I stood upon the lawn, looking around with a keen and subtle pleasure, I felt, almost for the first time in my life, the full charm and beauty of night. Every object was as clearly revealed as though the time had been noon instead of an hour past midnight, but there lay a mystic spell on tree and field and stream the garish day could never equal. It was a fairy light and a fairy scene, and it would scarcely have astonished me to see fantastic elves issue from the foxglove’s flowers or dart from the shelter of concealing leaves and dance a measure on the emerald sward.

For a minute I felt—as I fancy many and many a commonplace man must have done when first wedded to some miracle of grace and beauty—a sense of amazement and unreality.

All this loveliness was mine—the moonlit lawn—the stream murmuring through the fir plantation, singing soft melodies as it pursued its glittering way—the trees with a silvery gleam tinting their foliage—the roses giving out their sweetest, tenderest perfumes—the wonderful silence around—the fresh, pure air—the soft night wind—the prosperity with which God had blessed me. My heart grew full, as I turned and gazed first on this side and then on that, and I felt vexed and angry to remember I had ever suffered myself to listen to idle stories and to be made

uncomfortable by reason of village gossip.

On such a night it really seemed a shame to go to bed, and, accordingly, though the restlessness which first induced me to rise had vanished, and in doing so left the most soothing calm behind, I wandered on away from the house, now beside the stream, and again across a meadow, where faint odours from the lately carried hay still lingered.

Still the same unreal light over field and copse—still the same witching glamour—still the same secret feeling. I was seeing something and experiencing some sensation I might never again recall on this side of the grave!

A most lovely night—one most certainly not for drawn curtains and closed eyelids—one rather for lovers' *tête-a-tête* or a dreamy reverie—for two young hearts to reveal their secrets to each other or one soul to commune alone with God.

Still rambling, I found myself at last beside a stile, opening upon a path, which, winding upwards, led past the hollow where the nut trees grew, and then joined the footway leading through the long field to Whittleby. The long field was the last in that direction belonging to Nut Bush Farm. It joined upon a portion of the land surrounding Chalmont, and the field path continued consequently to pass through Miss Gostock's property till the main road was reached. It cut off a long distance, and had been used generally by the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets dotted about my place until the rumour being circulated that something might be "seen" or "met" deterred people from venturing by a route concerning which such evil things were whispered. I had walked it constantly, both on account of the time it saved and also in order to set a good example to my labourers and my neighbours, but I might as well have saved my pains.

I was regarded merely as foolhardy, and I knew people generally supposed I should one day have cause to repent my temerity.

As I cleared the stile and began winding my upward way to the higher ground beyond, the thought did strike me what a likely place for a murder Nut Bush Hollow looked. It was a deep excavation, out of which, as no one supposed it to be natural, hundreds and thousands of loads of earth must at some time or other have been carted. From top to bottom it was clothed with nut trees—they grew on every side, and in thick, almost

impenetrable masses. For years and years they seemed to have had no care bestowed on them, the Hollow forming in this respect a remarkable contrast to the rest of Mr. Hascot's careful farming, and, as a fir plantation ran along the base of the Hollow, while the moon's light fell clear and full on some of the bushes, the others lay in densest shadow.

The road that once led down into the pit was now completely overgrown with nut bushes which grew luxuriantly to the very edge of the Beech Walk, and threatened ere long to push their way between the trunks of the great trees, which were the beauty and the pride of my lovely farm.

At one time, so far as I could understand, the nut bushes had the whole place almost to themselves, and old inhabitants told me that formerly, in the days when their parents were boys and girls, the nuts used to pay the whole of the rent. As years passed, however, whether from want of care or some natural cause, they gradually ceased to bear, and had to be cut down and cleared off the ground—those in the dell, however, being suffered to remain, the hollow being useless for husbandry, and the bushes which flourished there producing a crop of nuts sufficient for the farmer's family.

All this recurred to my mind as I stood for a moment and looked down into the depths of rustling green below me. I thought of the boys who must have gone nutting there, of all the nests birds had built in the branches so closely interlaced, of the summers' suns which had shone full and strong upon that mass of foliage, of the winters' snows which had lain heavy on twig and stem and happed the strong roots in a warm coveting of purest white.

And then the former idea again asserted itself—what a splendid place for a tragedy; a sudden blow—a swift stab—even a treacherous push—and the deed could be done—a man might be alive and well one minute, and dead the next!

False friend, or secret enemy; rival or thief, it was competent for either in such a place at any lonely hour to send a man upon his last long journey. Had Mr. Hascot been so served? Down, far down, was he lying in a quiet, dreamless sleep? At that very moment was there anyone starting from fitful slumber to grapple with his remorse for crime committed, or shrink with horror from

the dread of detection?

“Where was my fancy leading me?” I suddenly asked myself. This was worse than in my own chamber preventing the night watches. Since I had been standing there my heart felt heavier than when tossing from side to side in bed, and wooing unsuccessfully the slumber which refused to come for my asking.

What folly! what nonsense! and into what an insane course of speculation had I not embarked.

I would leave the eerie place and get once again into the full light of the moon’s bright beams.

Hush! hark! what was that? deep down amongst the under-wood—a rustle, a rush, and a scurry—then silence—then a stealthy movement amongst the bushes—then whilst I was peering down into the abyss lined with waving green below, SOMETHING passed by me swiftly, something which brought with it a cold chill as though the hand of one dead had been laid suddenly on my heart.

Instantly I turned and looked around. There was not a living thing in sight—neither on the path, nor on the sward, nor on the hillside, nor skirting the horizon as I turned my eyes upward.

For a moment I stood still in order to steady my nerves, then reassuring myself with the thought it must have been an animal of some kind, I completed the remainder of the ascent without further delay.

“The ghost, I suspect,” I said to myself as I reached the long field and the path leading back to the farm, “will resolve itself into a hare or pheasant—is not the whirr of a cock pheasant rising, for instance, enough, when coming unexpectedly, to frighten any nervous person out of his wits? And might not a hare, or a cat, or, better still, a stoat—yes, a stoat, with its gliding, almost noiseless, movements—mimic the footfall of a suppositious ghost?”

By this time I had gained the summit of the incline, and slightly out of breath with breasting the ascent, stood for a moment contemplating the exquisite panorama stretched out beneath me. I linger on that moment because it was the last time I ever saw beauty in the moonlight. Now I cannot endure the silvery gleam of the queen of night—weird, mournful, fantastic if you like, but to be desired—no.

Whenever possible I draw the blinds and close the shutters, yet

withal on moonlight nights I cannot sleep, the horror of darkness is to my mind nothing in comparison to the terror of a full moon. But I drive! let me hasten on.

From the crest of the hill I could see lying below a valley of dreamlike beauty—woods in the foreground—a champagne country spreading away into the indefinite distance—a stream winding in and out, dancing and glittering under the moon's beams—a line of hills dimly seen against the horizon, and already a streak of light appearing above them the first faint harbinger of dawn.

"It is morning, then, already," I said, and with the words turned my face homewards. As I did so I saw before me on the path—*clearly*—the figure of a man.

He was walking rapidly and I hurried my pace in order to overtake him. Now to this part of the story I desire to draw particular attention. *Let me hurry as I might I never seem able to get a foot nearer to him.*

At intervals he paused, as if on purpose to assist my desire, but the moment I seemed gaining upon him the distance between us suddenly increased. I could not tell how he did it, the fact only remained—it was like pursuing some phantom in a dream.

All at once when he reached the bridge he stood quite still. He did not move hand or limb as I drew near—the way was so narrow I knew I should have to touch him in passing; nevertheless, I pressed forward. My foot was on the bridge—I was close to him—I felt my breath coming thick and fast—I clasped a stick I had picked up in the plantation firmly in my hand—I stopped, intending to speak—I opened my mouth, intending to do so—and then—then—without any movement on his part—I was alone!

Yes, as totally alone as though he had never stood on the bridge—never preceded me along the field-path—never loitered upon my footsteps—never paused for my coming. I was appalled.

"Lord, what is this?" I thought. "Am I going mad?" I felt as if I were. On my honour, I know I was as nearly insane at that moment as a man ever can be who is still in the possession of his senses.

Beyond lay the farm of which in my folly I had felt so proud to be the owner, where I once meant to be so happy and win health for my wife and strength for my boy. I saw the Beech Walk I had

gloried in—the ricks of hay it seemed so good to get thatched geometrically as only one man in the neighbourhood was said to be able to lay the straw.

What was farm, or riches, or beech trees, or anything, to me now? Over the place there seemed a curse—better the meanest cottage than a palace with such accessories.

If I had been incredulous before, I was not so now—I could not distrust the evidence of my own eyes—and yet as I walked along, I tried after a minute or two to persuade myself imagination had been playing some juggler's trick with me. The moon, I argued, always lent herself readily to a game of hide-and-seek. She is always open to join in fantastic gambols with shadows—with thorn bushes—with a waving branch—aye, even with a clump of gorse. I must have been mistaken—I had been thinking weird thoughts as I stood by that dismal dell—I had seen no man walking—beheld no figure disappear. Just as I arrived at this conclusion I beheld someone coming towards me down the Beech Walk. It was a man walking leisurely with a firm, free step. The sight did me good. Here was something tangible—something to question. I stood still, in the middle of the path—the Beech Walk being rather a grassy glade with a narrow footway dividing it, than anything usually understood by the term walk—so that I might speak to the intruder when he drew near, and ask him what he meant by trespassing on my property, more especially at such an hour. There were no public rights on my land except as regarded the path across the long field and through the wood. No one had any right or business to be in the Beech Walk, by day or night, save those employed about the farm, and this person was a gentleman; even in the distance I could distinguish that. As he came closer I saw he was dressed in a loose Palmerston suit, that he wore a low-crowned hat, and that he carried a light cane. The moonbeams dancing down amongst the branches and between the leaves fell full upon his face, and catching sight of a ring he had on his right hand, made it glitter with as many different colours as a prism.

A middle-aged man, so far as I could judge, with a set, determined expression of countenance, dark hair, no beard or whiskers, only a small moustache. A total stranger to me. I had never seen him nor any one like him in the neighbourhood. Who could he be, and what in the wide world was he doing on my

premises at that unearthly hour of the morning?

He came straight on, never moving to right or left—taking no more notice of me than if he had been blind. His easy indifference, his contemptuous coolness, angered me, and planting myself a little more in his way, I began:

“Are you aware, sir——”

I got no further. Without swerving in the slightest degree from the path, he passed me! I felt something like a cold mist touch me for an instant, and the next, I saw him pursuing his steady walk down the centre of the glade. I was sick with fear, but for all that I ran after him faster than I had ever done since boyhood.

All to no purpose! I might as well have tried to catch the wind. Just where three ways joined I stood still and looked around. I was quite alone! Neither sign nor token of the intruder could I discover. On my left lay the dell where the nut trees grew, and above it the field path to Whittleby showing white and clear in the moonlight; close at hand was the bridge; straight in front the wood looked dark and solemn. Between me and it lay a little hollow, down which a narrow path wound tortuously. As I gazed I saw that, where a moment before no one had been, a man was walking now. But I could not follow. My limbs refused their office. He turned his head, and lifting his hand on which the ring glittered, beckoned me to come. He might as well have asked one seized with paralysis. On the confines of the wood he stood motionless as if awaiting my approach; then, when I made no sign of movement, he wrung his hands with a despairing gesture, and disappeared.

At the same moment, moon, dell, bridge, and stream faded from my sight—and I fainted.

Chapter Four

It was not much past eight o'clock when I knocked at Miss Gostock's hall door, and asked if I could see that lady.

After that terrible night vision I had made up my mind. Behind Mr. Hascot's disappearance I felt sure there lurked some terrible tragedy—living, no man should have implored my help with such passionate earnestness without avail, and if indeed one had appeared to me from the dead I would right him if I could.

But never for a moment did I then think of giving up the farm. The resolve I had come to seemed to have braced up my courage—let what might come or go, let crops remain unreaped and men neglect their labour, let monetary loss and weary, anxious days be in store if they would, I meant to go on to the end.

The first step on my road clearly led in the direction of Miss Gostock's house. She alone could give me all the information I required—here alone could I speak freely and fully about what I had seen.

I was instantly admitted, and found the lady, as I had expected, at breakfast. It was her habit, I knew, to partake of that meal while the labourers she employed were similarly engaged. She was attired in an easy *négligé* of a white skirt and a linen coat which had formerly belonged to her brother. She was not taking tea or coffee like any other woman—but was engaged upon about a pound of smoking steak which she ate covered with mustard and washed down with copious draughts of home-brewed beer.

She received me cordially and invited me to join in the banquet—a request I ungallantly declined, eliciting in return the remark I should never be good for much till I ceased living on “slops” and took to “good old English” fare.

After these preliminaries I drew my chair near the table and said: “I want you to give me some information, Miss Gostock, about my predecessor.”

“What sort of information?” she asked, with a species of frost at once coming over her manner.

“Can you tell me anything of his personal appearance?”

“Why do you ask?”

I did not immediately answer, and seeing my hesitation she went on: “Because if you mean to tell me you or anyone else have seen him about your place I would not believe it if you swore it—there!”

“I do not ask you to believe it, Miss Gostock,” I said.

“And I give you fair warning, it is of no use coming here and asking me to relieve you of your bargain, because I won't do it. I like you well enough—better than I ever liked a tenant; but I don't intend to be a shilling out of pocket by you.”

“I hope you never may be,” I answered meekly.

“I'll take very good care I never am,” she retorted; “and so

don't come here talking about Mr. Hascot. He served me a dirty turn, and I would not put it one bit past him to try and get the place a bad name."

"Will you tell me what sort of looking man he was?" I asked determinedly.

"No, I won't," she snapped, and while she spoke she rose, drained the last drop out of a pewter measure, and after tossing on the straw hat with a defiant gesture, thumped its crown well down on her head. I took the hint, and rising, said I must endeavour to ascertain the particulars I wanted elsewhere.

"You won't ascertain them from me," retorted Miss Gostock, and we parted as we had never done before—on bad terms.

Considerably perplexed, I walked out of the house. A rebuff of this sort was certainly the last thing I could have expected, and as I paced along I puzzled myself by trying to account for Miss Gostock's extraordinary conduct, and anxiously considering what I was to do under present circumstances. All at once the recollection of mine host of the "Bunch of Hops" flashed across my mind. He must have seen Mr. Hascot often, and I could address a few casual questions to him without exciting his curiosity.

No sooner thought than done. Turning my face towards Whittleby, I stepped briskly on.

"Did I ever see Mr. Hascot?" repeated the landlord—when after some general conversation about politics, the weather, the crops, and many other subjects, I adroitly turned it upon the late tenant of Nut Bush Farm. "Often, sir. I never had much communication with him, for he was one of your stand-aloo, keep-your-distance, sort of gentlemen—fair dealing and honourable—but neither free nor generous. He has often sat where you are sitting now, sir, and not so much as said—'it is a fine day,' or, 'I am afraid we shall have rain.'"

"You had but to see him walking down the street to know what he was. As erect as a grenadier, with a firm easy sort of marching step, he looked every inch a gentleman—just in his everyday clothes, a *Palmerston suit* and a *round hat*, he was, as many a one said, fit to go to court. His hands were not a bit like a farmer's, but white and delicate as any lady's, and the *diamond ring* he wore flashed like a star when he stroked the *slight bit of a moustache* that was *all the hair he had upon his face*. No—not a handsome gentleman,

but fine looking, with a presence—bless and save us all to think of his giving up everything for the sake of that slip of a girl.”

“She was very pretty, wasn’t she?” I inquired.

“Beautiful—we all said she was too pretty to come to any good. The old grandmother, you see, had serious cause for keeping so tight a hold over her, but it was in her, and ‘what’s bred in bone,’ you know, sir.”

“And you really think they did go off together?”

“Oh, yes, sir; nobody had ever any doubt about that.”

On this subject his tone was so decided I felt it was useless to continue the conversation, and having paid him for the modest refreshment of which I had partaken I sauntered down the High Street and turned into the Bank, where I thought of opening an account.

When I had settled all preliminaries with the manager he saved me the trouble of beating about the bush by breaking cover himself and asking if anything had been heard of Mr. Hascot.

“Not that I know of,” I answered.

“Curious affair, wasn’t it?” he said.

“It appears so, but I have not heard the whole story.”

“Well, the whole story is brief,” returned the manager. “He comes over here one day and without assigning any reason withdraws the whole of his balance, which was very heavy—is met on the road homeward but never returns home—the same day the girl Powner is also missing—what do you think of all that?”

“It is singular,” I said, “very.”

“Yes, and to leave his wife and family totally unprovided for.”

“I cannot understand that at all.”

“Nor I—it was always known he had an extreme partiality for the young person—he and Miss Gostock quarrelled desperately on the subject—but no one could have imagined an attachment of that sort would have led a man so far astray—Hascot more especially. If I had been asked to name the last person in the world likely to make a fool of himself for the sake of a pretty face I should have named the late tenant of Nut Bush Farm.”

“There never was a suspicion of foul play,” I suggested.

“Oh, dear, no! It was broad daylight when he was last seen on the Whittleby road. The same morning it is known he and the girl were talking earnestly together beside the little wood on your

property, and two persons answering to their description were traced to London, that is to say, a gentleman came forward to say he believed he had travelled up with them as far as New Cross on the afternoon in question.

"He was an affectionate father I have heard," I said.

"A *most* affectionate parent—a most devoted husband. Dear, dear! It is dreadfully sad to think how a bad woman may drag the best of men down to destruction. It is terrible to think of his wife and family being inmates of the Union."

"Yes, and it is terrible to consider not a soul has tried to get them out of it," I answered, a little tartly.

"H—m, perhaps so; but we all know we are contributing to their support," he returned with an effort at jocularly, which, in my then frame of mind, seemed singularly *mal-apropos*.

"There is something in that," I replied with an effort, and leaving the Bank next turned my attention to the Poorhouse at Crayshill.

At that time many persons thought what I did quixotic. It is so much the way of the world to let the innocent suffer for the guilty, that I believe Mr. Hascot's wife might have ended her days in Crayshill Union but for the action I took in the matter.

Another night I felt I could not rest till I had arranged for a humble lodging she and her family could occupy till I was able to form some plan for their permanent relief. I found her a quiet, ladylike woman, totally unable to give me the slightest clue as to where her husband might be found. "He was just at the stile on the Chalmont fields," she said, "when Mr. Waite met him; no one saw him afterwards, unless it might be the Ockfields, but, of course, there is no information to be got them. The guardians have tried every possible means to discover his whereabouts without success. My own impression is he and Sally Powner have gone to America, and that some day we may hear from him. He cannot harden his heart for ever and forget—" Here Mrs. Hascot's sentence trailed off into passionate weeping.

"It is too monstrous!" I considered; "the man never did such a thing as desert his wife and children. Someone knows all about the matter," and then in a moment I paused in the course of my meditations. *Was that person Miss Gostock?*

It was an ugly idea, and yet it haunted me. When I remembered

the woman's masculine strength, when I recalled her furious impetuosity when I asked her a not very exasperating question, as I recalled the way she tossed off that brandy, when I considered her love of money, her eagerness to speak ill of her late tenant, her semi-references to some great trouble prior to which she was more like other women, or, perhaps, to speak more correctly, less unlike them—doubts came crowding upon my mind.

It was when entering her ground Mr. Hascot was last seen. He had a large sum of money in his possession. She was notoriously fond of rambling about Nut Bush Farm, and what my labouring men called "spying around," which had been the cause of more than one pitched battle between herself and Mr. Hascot.

"The old master could not a-bear her," said one young fellow.

I hated myself for the suspicion; and yet, do what I would, I could not shake it off. Not for a moment did I imagine Miss Gostock had killed her former tenant in cold blood; but it certainly occurred to me that the dell was deep, and the verge treacherous, that it would be easy to push a man over, either by accident or design, that the nut-bushes grew thick, that a body might lie amongst them till it rotted, ere even the boys who went nutting there, season after season, happened to find it.

Should I let the matter drop? No, I decided. With that mute appeal haunting my memory, I should know no rest or peace till I had solved the mystery of Mr. Hascot's disappearance, and cleared his memory from the shameful stain circumstances had cast upon it.

What should I do next? I thought the matter over for a few days, and then decided to call on Mr. Waite, who never yet had called on me. As usual, he was not at home; but I saw his wife, whom I found just the sort of woman Lolly described—a fair, delicate creature who seemed fading into the grave.

She had not much to tell me. It was her husband who saw Mr. Hascot at the Chalmont stile; it was he also who had seen Mr. Hascot and the girl Powner talking together on the morning of their disappearance. It so happened he had often chanced to notice them together before. "She was a very, very pretty girl," Mrs. Waite added, "and I always thought a modest. She had a very sweet way of speaking—quite above her station—inherited, no doubt, for her father was a gentleman. Poor little Sally!"

The words were not much, but the manner touched me sensibly. I felt drawn to Mrs. Waite from that moment, and told her more of what I had beheld and what I suspected than I had mentioned to anyone else.

As to my doubts concerning Miss Gostock, I was, of course, silent but I said quite plainly I did not believe Mr. Hascot had gone off with any girl or woman either, that I thought he had come to an unfair end, and that I was of opinion the stories circulated, concerning a portion of Nut Bush Farm being haunted, had some foundation in fact.

"Do you believe in ghosts then?" she asked, with a curious smile.

"I believe in the evidence of my senses," I answered, "and I declare to you, Mrs. Waite, that one night, not long since, I saw as plainly as I see you what I can only conclude to have been the semblance of Mr. Hascot."

She did not make any reply, she only turned very pale, and blaming myself for having alarmed one in her feeble state of health, I hastened to apologise and take my leave.

As we shook hands, she retained mine for a moment, and said, "When you hear anything more, if you should, that is, you will tell us, will you not? Naturally we feel interested in the matter, he was such a neighbour, and—we knew him."

I assured her I would not fail to do so, and left the room.

Before I reached the front door I found I had forgotten one of my gloves, and immediately retraced my steps.

The drawing-room door was ajar, and somewhat unceremoniously, perhaps, I pushed it open and entered.

To my horror and surprise, Mrs. Waite, whom I had left apparently in her ordinary state of languid health, lay full length on the sofa, sobbing as if her heart would break. What I said so indiscreetly had brought on an attack of violent hysterics—a malady with the signs and tokens of which I was not altogether unacquainted.

Silently I stole out of the room without my glove, and left the house, closing the front door noiselessly behind me.

A couple of days elapsed, and then I decided to pay a visit to Mrs. Ockfield. If she liked to throw any light on the matter, I felt satisfied she could. It was, to say the least of it, most improbable

her grand-daughter, whether she had been murdered or gone away with Mr. Hascot, should disappear and not leave a clue by which her relatives could trace her.

The Ockfields were not liked, I found, and I flattered myself if they had any hand in Mr. Hascot's sudden disappearance I should soon hit on some weak spot in their story.

I found the old woman, who was sixty-seven, and who looked two hundred, standing over her washing tub.

"Can I tell you where my grand-daughter is," she repeated, drawing her hands out of the suds and wiping them on her apron. "Surely sir, and very glad I am to be able to tell everybody, gentle and simple, where to find our Sally. She is in a good service down in Cheshire. Mr. Hascot got her the place, but we knew nothing about it till yesterday; she left us in a bit of a pet, and said she wouldn't have written me only something seemed to tell her she must. Ah! she'll have a sore heart when she gets my letter and hears how it has been said that the master and she went off together. She thought a deal of the master, did Sally; he was always kind and stood between her and her grandfather."

"Then do you mean to say," I asked, "that she knows nothing of Mr. Hascot's disappearance?"

"Nothing, sir, thank God for all His mercies; the whole of the time since the day she left here she has been in service with a friend of his. You can read her letter if you like."

Though I confess old Mrs. Ockfield neither charmed nor inspired me with confidence, I answered that I should like to see the letter very much indeed.

When I took it in my hand I am bound to say I thought it had been written with a purpose, and intended less for a private than for the public eye, but as I read I fancied there was a ring of truth about the epistle, more especially as the writer made passing reference to a very bitter quarrel which had preceded her departure from the grand-paternal roof.

"It is very strange," I said, as I returned the letter, "it is a most singular coincidence that your grand-daughter and Mr. Hascot should have left Whittleby on the same day, and yet that she should know nothing of his whereabouts, as judging from her letter seems to be the case.

"Are you quite sure Mr. Hascot ever did leave Whittleby, sir?"

asked the old woman with a vindictive look in her still bright old eyes. "There are those as think he never went very far from home, and that the whole truth will come out some day."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Least said soonest mended," she answered shortly; "only I hopes if ever we do know the rights of it, people as do hold their heads high enough, and have had plenty to say about our girl, and us too for that matter, will find things not so pleasant as they find them at present. The master had a heap of money about him, and we know that often those as has are those as wants more!"

"I cannot imagine what you are driving at," I said, for I feared every moment she would mention Miss Gostock, and bring her name into the discussion. "If you think Mr. Hascot met with any foul play you ought to go to the police about the matter."

"Maybe I will some time," she answered, "but just now I have my washing to do."

"This will buy you some tea to have afterwards," I said, laying down half-a-crown, and feeling angry with myself for this momentary irritation. After all, the woman had as much right to her suspicions as I to mine.

Thinking over Miss Powner's letter, I came to the conclusion it might be well to see the young lady for myself. If I went to the address she wrote from I could ascertain at all events whether her statement regarding her employment was correct. Yes, I would take train and travel into Cheshire; I had commenced the investigation and I would follow it to the end.

I travelled so much faster than Mrs. Ockfield's letter—which, indeed, that worthy woman had not then posted—that when I arrived at my journey's end I found the fair Sally in total ignorance of Mr. Hascot's disappearance and the surmises to which her own absence had given rise.

Appearances might be against the girl's truth and honesty, yet I felt she was dealing fairly with me.

"A better gentleman, sir," she said, "than Mr. Hascot never drew breath. And so they set it about he had gone off with me — they little know — they little know! Why, sir, he thought of me and was careful for me as he might for a daughter. The first time I ever saw him grandfather was beating me, and he interfered to save me. He knew they treated me badly, and it was after a

dreadful quarrel I had at home he advised me to go away. He gave me a letter to the lady I am now with, and a ten-pound note to pay my travelling expenses and keep something in my pocket.

"You'll be better away from the farm, little girl," he said the morning I left; "people are beginning to talk, and we can't shut their mouths if you come running to me every time your grandmother speaks sharply to you."

"But why did you not write sooner to your relatives?" I asked.

"Because I was angry with my grandmother, sir, and I thought I would give her a fright. I did not bring any clothes or anything and I hoped—it was a wicked thing I know, sir—but I hoped she would believe I had made away with myself. Just lately, however, I began to consider that if she and grandfather had not treated me well, I was treating them worse, so I made up a parcel of some things my mistress gave me and sent it to them with a letter. I am glad it reached them safely."

"What time was it when you saw Mr. Hascot last?" I inquired.

"About two o'clock, sir, I know that, because he was in a hurry. He had got some news about the Bank at Whittleby not being quite safe, and he said he had too much money there to run any risk of loss. 'Be a good girl,' were the last words he said, and he walked off sharp and quick by the field path to Whittleby. I stood near the bridge crying for a while. Oh, sir I do you think anything ill can have happened to him?"

For answer, I only said the whole thing seemed most mysterious.

"He'd never have left his wife and children, sir," she went on; "never. He must have been made away with."

"Had he any enemies, do you think?" I asked.

"No, sir; not to say enemies. He was called hard because he would have a day's work for a day's wage, but no one that ever I heard of had a grudge against him. Except Miss Gostock and Mr. Waite, he agreed well with all the people about. He did not like Miss Gostock, and Mr. Waite was always borrowing money from him. Now Mr. Hascot did not mind giving, but he could not bear lending."

I returned to Nut Bush Farm perfectly satisfied that Mr. Hascot had been, as the girl expressed the matter, "made away with." On the threshold of my house I was met with a catalogue of disasters.

The female servants had gone in a body; the male professed a dislike to be in the stable-yard in the twilight. Rumour had decided that Nut Bush Farm was an unlucky place even to pass. The cattle were out of condition because the men would not go down the Beech Walk, or turn a single sheep into the long field. Reapers wanted higher wages. The labourers were looking out for other service.

"Poor fellow! This is a nice state of things for you to come home to," said Lolly compassionately. "Even the poachers won't venture into the wood, and the boys don't go nutting."

"I will clear away the nut trees and cut down the wood," I declared savagely.

"I don't know who you are going to get to cut them," answered Lolly, "unless you bring men down from London."

As for Miss Gostock, she only laughed at my dilemma, and said, "You're a pretty fellow to be frightened by a ghost. If he was seen at Chalmont I'd ghost him."

While I was in a state of the most cruel perplexity, I bethought me of my promise to Mrs. Waite, and walked over one day to tell her the result of my inquiries.

I found her at home, and Mr. Waite, for a wonder, in the drawing-room. He was not a bad-looking fellow, and welcomed my visit with a heartiness which ill accorded with the discourtesy he had shown in never calling upon me.

Very succinctly I told what I had done, and where I had been. I mentioned the terms in which Sally Powner spoke of her benefactor. We discussed the whole matter fully—the pros and cons of anyone knowing Mr. Hascot had such a sum of money on his person, and the possibility of his having been murdered. I mentioned what I had done about Mrs. Hascot, and begged Mr. Waite to afford me his help and co-operation in raising such a sum of money as might start the poor lady in some business.

"I'll do all that lies in my power," he said heartily, shaking hands at the same time, for I had risen to go.

"And for my part," I remarked, "it seems to me there are only two things more I can do to elucidate the mystery, and those are—root every nut-tree out of the dell and set the axe to work in the wood."

There was a second's silence. Then Mrs. Waite dropped to the

floor as if she had been shot.

As he stooped over her he and I exchanged glances, and then I *knew*. Mr. Hascot had been murdered, and Mr. Waite was the murderer!

* * * * *

That night I was smoking and Lolly at needlework. The parlour windows were wide open, for it was warm, and not a breath of air seemed stirring.

There was a stillness on everything which betokened a coming thunderstorm; and we both were silent, for my mind was busy and Lolly's heart anxious. She did not see, as she said, how I was to get on at all, and for my part I could not tell what I ought to do.

All at once something whizzed through the window furthest from where we sat, and fell noisily to the floor.

"What is that?" Lolly cried, springing to her feet. "Oh, Jack! What is it?"

Surprised and shaken myself, I closed the windows and drew down the blinds before I examined the cause of our alarm. It proved to be an oblong package weighted with a stone.

Unfastening it cautiously, for I did not know whether it might not contain some explosive, I came at length to a pocket book. Opening the pocket book, I found it stuffed full of bank notes.

"What are they? Where can they have come from?" exclaimed Lolly.

"They are the notes Mr. Hascot drew from Whittleby bank the day he disappeared," I answered with a sort of inspiration, but I took no notice of Lolly's last question.

For good or for evil that was a secret which lay between myself and the Waites, and which I have never revealed till now.

If the vessel in which they sailed for New Zealand had not gone to the bottom I should have kept the secret still.

When they were out of the country and the autumn well advanced, I had the wood thoroughly examined, and there in a gully, covered with a mass of leaves and twigs and dead branches, we found Mr. Hascot's body. His watch was in his waistcoat pocket—his ring on his finger; save for these possessions no one could have identified him.

His wife married again about a year afterwards and my brother took Nut Bush Farm off my hands. He says the place never was haunted—that I never saw Mr. Hascot except in my own imagination—that the whole thing originated in a poor state of health and a too credulous disposition!

I leave the reader to judge between us.

The Old House in Vauxhall Walk

Chapter One

“Houseless—homeless—hopeless!”

Many a one who had before him trodden that same street must have uttered the same words—the weary, the desolate, the hungry, the forsaken, the waifs and strays of struggling humanity that are always coming and going, cold, starving and miserable, over the pavements of Lambeth Parish; but it is open to question whether they were ever previously spoken with a more thorough conviction of their truth, or with a feeling of keener self-pity, than by the young man who hurried along Vauxhall Walk one rainy winter’s night, with no overcoat on his shoulders and no hat on his head.

A strange sentence for one-and-twenty to give expression to—and it was stranger still to come from the lips of a person who looked like and who was a gentleman. He did not appear either to have sunk very far down in the good graces of Fortune. There was no sign or token which would have induced a passer-by to imagine he had been worsted after a long fight with calamity. His boots were not worn down at the heels or broken at the toes, as many, many boots were which dragged and shuffled and scraped along the pavement. His clothes were good and fashionably cut, and innocent of the rents and patches and tatters that slunk wretchedly by, crouched in doorways, and held out a hand mutely appealing for charity. His face was not pinched with famine or lined with wicked wrinkles, or brutalised by drink and debauchery, and yet he said and thought he was hopeless, and almost in his young despair spoke the words aloud.

It was a bad night to be about with such a feeling in one’s heart. The rain was cold, pitiless and increasing. A damp, keen wind blew down the cross streets leading from the river. The fumes of the gas works seemed to fall with the rain. The roadway was muddy; the pavement greasy; the lamps burned dimly; and that dreary district of London looked its very gloomiest and worst.

Certainly not an evening to be abroad without a home to go to, or a sixpence in one’s pocket, yet this was the position of the

young gentleman who, without a hat, strode along Vauxhall Walk, the rain beating on his unprotected head.

Upon the houses, so large and good—once inhabited by well-to-do citizens, now let out for the most part in floors to weekly tenants—he looked enviously. He would have given much to have had a room, or even part of one. He had been walking for a long time, ever since dark in fact, but dark falls soon in December. He was tired and cold and hungry, and he saw no prospect save of pacing the streets all night.

As he passed one of the lamps, the light falling on his face revealed handsome young features, a mobile, sensitive mouth, and that particular formation of the eyebrows—not a frown exactly, but a certain draw of the brows—often considered to bespeak genius, but which more surely accompanies an impulsive organisation easily pleased, easily depressed, capable of suffering very keenly or of enjoying fully. In his short life he had not enjoyed much, and he had suffered a good deal. That night, when he walked bareheaded through the rain, affairs had come to a crisis. So far as he in his despair felt able to see or reason, the best thing he could do was to die. The world did not want him; he would be better out of it.

The door of one of the houses stood open, and he could see in the dimly lighted hall some few articles of furniture waiting to be removed. A van stood beside the curb, and two men were lifting a table into it as he, for a second, paused.

“Ah,” he thought, “even those poor people have some place to go to, some shelter provided, while I have not a roof to cover my head, or a shilling to get a night’s lodging.” And he went on fast, as if memory were spurring him, so fast that a man running after had some trouble to overtake him.

“Master Graham! Master Graham!” this man exclaimed, breathlessly; and, thus addressed, the young fellow stopped as if he had been shot.

“Who are you that know me?” he asked, facing round.

“I’m William; don’t you remember William, Master Graham? And, Lord’s sake, sir, what are you doing out a night like this without your hat?”

“I forgot it,” was the answer; “and I did not care to go back and fetch it.”

"Then why don't you buy another, sir? You'll catch your death of cold; and besides, you'll excuse me, sir, but it does look odd."

"I know that," said Master Graham grimly; "but I haven't a halfpenny in the world."

"Have you and the master, then—" began the man, but there he hesitated and stopped.

"Had a quarrel? Yes, and one that will last us our lives," finished the other, with a bitter laugh.

"And where are you going now?"

"Going! Nowhere, except to seek out the softest paving stone, or the shelter of an arch."

"You are joking, sir."

"I don't feel much in a mood for jesting either."

"Will you come back with me, Master Graham? We are just at the last of our moving, but there is a spark of fire still in the grate, and it would be better talking out of this rain. Will you come, sir?"

"Come! Of course I will come," said the young fellow, and, turning, they retraced their steps to the house he had looked into as he passed along.

An old, old house, with long, wide hall, stairs low, easy of ascent, with deep cornices to the ceilings, and oak floorings, and mahogany doors, which still spoke mutely of the wealth and stability of the original owner, who lived before the Tradescants and Ashmoles were thought of, and had been sleeping far longer than they, in St Mary's churchyard, hard by the archbishop's palace.

"Step upstairs, sir," entreated the departing tenant; "it's cold down here, with the door standing wide."

"Had you the whole house, then, William?" asked Graham Coulton, in some surprise.

"The whole of it, and right sorry I, for one, am to leave it; but nothing else would serve my wife. This room, sir," and with a little conscious pride, William, doing the honours of his late residence, asked his guest into a spacious apartment occupying the full width of the house on the first floor.

Tired though he was, the young man could not repress an exclamation of astonishment.

"Why, we have nothing so large as this at home, William," he said.

"It's a fine house," answered William, raking the embers

together as he spoke and throwing some wood upon them; "but, like many a good family, it has come down in the world."

There were four windows in the room, shuttered close; they had deep, low seats, suggestive of pleasant days gone by; when, well-curtained and well-cushioned, they formed snug retreats for the children, and sometimes for adults also; there was no furniture left, unless an oaken settle beside the hearth, and a large mirror let into the panelling at the opposite end of the apartment, with a black marble console table beneath it, could be so considered; but the very absence of chairs and tables enabled the magnificent proportions of the chamber to be seen to full advantage, and there was nothing to distract the attention from the ornamented ceiling, the panelled walls, the old-world chimney-piece so quaintly carved, and the fireplace lined with tiles, each one of which contained a picture of some scriptural or allegorical subject.

"Had you been staying on here, William," said Coulton, flinging himself wearily on the settle, "I'd have asked you to let me stop where I am for the night."

"If you can make shift, sir, there is nothing as I am aware of to prevent you stopping," answered the man, fanning the wood into a flame. "I shan't take the key back to the landlord till tomorrow, and this would be better for you than the cold streets at any rate."

"Do you really mean what you say?" asked the other eagerly. "I should be thankful to lie here; I feel dead beat."

"Then stay, Master Graham, and welcome. I'll fetch a basket of coals I was going to put in the van, and make up a good fire, so that you can warm yourself then I must run round to the other house for a minute or two, but it's not far, and I'll be back as soon as ever I can."

"Thank you, William; you were always good to me," said the young man gratefully. "This is delightful," and he stretched his numbed hands over the blazing wood, and looked round the room with a satisfied smile.

"I did not expect to get into such quarters," he remarked, as his friend in need reappeared, carrying a half-bushel basket full of coals, with which he proceeded to make up a roaring fire. "I am sure the last thing I could have imagined was meeting with anyone I knew in Vauxhall Walk."

"Where were you coming from, Master Graham?" asked

William curiously.

"From old Melfield's. I was at his school once, you know, and he has now retired, and is living upon the proceeds of years of robbery in Kennington Oval. I thought, perhaps he would lend me a pound, or offer me a night's lodging, or even a glass of wine; but, oh dear, no. He took the moral tone, and observed he could have nothing to say to a son who defied his father's authority. He gave me plenty of advice, but nothing else, and showed me out into the rain with a bland courtesy, for which I could have struck him."

William muttered something under his breath which was not a blessing, and added aloud: "You are better here, sir, I think, at any rate. I'll be back in less than half an hour."

Left to himself, young Coulton took off his coat, and shifting the settle a little, hung it over the end to dry. With his handkerchief he rubbed some of the wet out of his hair; then, perfectly exhausted, he lay down before the fire and, pillowing his head on his arm, fell fast asleep.

He was awakened nearly an hour afterwards by the sound of someone gently stirring the fire and moving quietly about the room. Starting into a sitting posture, he looked around him, bewildered for a moment, and then, recognising his humble friend, said laughingly: "I had lost myself; I could not imagine where I was."

"I am sorry to see you here, sir," was the reply; "but still this is better than being out of doors. It has come on a nasty night. I brought a rug round with me that, perhaps, you would wrap yourself in."

"I wish, at the same time, you had brought me something to eat," said the young man, laughing.

"Are you hungry, then, sir?" asked William, in a tone of concern.

"Yes; I have had nothing to eat since breakfast. The governor and I commenced rowing the minute we sat down to luncheon, and I rose and left the table. But hunger does not signify; I am dry and warm, and can forget the other matter in sleep."

"And it's too late now to buy anything," soliloquised the man; "the shops are all shut long ago. Do you think, sir," he added, brightening, "you could manage some bread and cheese?"

"Do I think—I should call it a perfect feast," answered Graham

Coulton. "But never mind about food tonight, William; you have had trouble enough, and to spare, already."

William's only answer was to dart to the door and run downstairs. Presently he reappeared, carrying in one hand bread and cheese wrapped up in paper, and in the other a pewter measure full of beer.

"It's the best I could do, sir," he said apologetically. "I had to beg this from the landlady."

"Here's to her good health!" exclaimed the young fellow gaily, taking a long pull at the tankard. "That tastes better than champagne in my father's house."

"Won't he be uneasy about you?" ventured William, who, having by this time emptied the coals, was now seated on the inverted basket, looking wistfully at the relish with which the son of the former master was eating his bread and cheese.

"No," was the decided answer. "When he hears it pouring cats and dogs he will only hope I am out in the deluge, and say a good drenching will cool my pride."

"I do not think you are right there," remarked the man.

"But I am sure I am. My father always hated me, as he hated my mother."

"Begging your pardon, sir; he was over fond of your mother."

"If you had heard what he said about her today, you might find reason to alter your opinion. He told me I resembled her in mind as well as body; that I was a coward, a simpleton, and a hypocrite."

"He did not mean it, sir."

"He did, every word. He does think I am a coward, because I—I—" And the young fellow broke into a passion of hysterical tears.

"I don't half like leaving you here alone," said William, glancing round the room with a quick trouble in his eyes; "but I have no place fit to ask you to stop, and I am forced to go myself, because I am night watchman, and must be on at twelve o'clock."

"I shall be right enough," was the answer. "Only I mustn't talk any more of my father. Tell me about yourself, William. How did you manage to get such a big house, and why are you leaving it?"

"The landlord put me in charge, sir; and it was my wife's fancy not to like it."

"Why did she not like it?"

"She felt desolate alone with the children at night," answered

William, turning away his head; then added, next minute: "Now, sir, if you think I can do no more for you, I had best be off. Time's getting on. I'll look round tomorrow morning."

"Good night," said the young fellow, stretching out his hand, which the other took as freely and frankly as it was offered. "What should I have done this evening if I had not chanced to meet you?"

"I don't think there is much chance in the world, Master Graham," was the quiet answer. "I do hope you will rest well, and not be the worse for your wetting."

"No fear of that," was the rejoinder, and the next minute the young man found himself all alone in the Old House in Vauxhall Walk.

Chapter Two

Lying on the settle, with the fire burnt out, and the room in total darkness, Graham Coulton dreamed a curious dream. He thought he awoke from deep slumber to find a log smouldering away upon the hearth, and the mirror at the end of the apartment reflecting fitful gleams of light. He could not understand how it came to pass that, far away as he was from the glass, he was able to see everything in it; but he resigned himself to the difficulty without astonishment, as people generally do in dreams.

Neither did he feel surprised when he beheld the outline of a female figure seated beside the fire, engaged in picking something out of her lap and dropping it with a despairing gesture.

He heard the mellow sound of gold, and knew she was lifting and dropping sovereigns, he turned a little so as to see the person engaged in such a singular and meaningless manner, and found that, where there had been no chair on the previous night, there was a chair now, on which was seated an old, wrinkled hag, her clothes poor and ragged, a mob cap barely covering her scant white hair, her cheeks sunken, her nose hooked, her fingers more like talons than aught else as they dived down into the heap of gold, portions of which they lifted but to scatter mournfully.

"Oh! my lost life," she moaned, in a voice of the bitterest anguish. "Oh! my lost life—for one day, for one hour of it again!"

Out of the darkness—out of the corner of the room where the shadows lay deepest—out from the gloom abiding near the door—out from the dreary night, with their sodden feet and wet dripping from their heads, came the old men and the young children, the worn women and the weary hearts, whose misery that gold might have relieved, but whose wretchedness it mocked.

Round that miser, who once sat gloating as she now sat lamenting, they crowded—all those pale, sad shapes—the aged of days, the infant of hours, the sobbing outcast, honest poverty, repentant vice; but one low cry proceeded from those pale lips—a cry for help she might have given, but which she withheld.

They closed about her, all together, as they had done singly in life; they prayed, they sobbed, they entreated; with haggard eyes the figure regarded the poor she had repulsed, the children against whose cry she had closed her ears, the old people she had suffered to starve and die for want of what would have been the merest trifle to her; then, with a terrible scream, she raised her lean arms above her head, and sank down—down—the gold scattering as it fell out of her lap, and rolling along the floor, till its gleam was lost in the outer darkness beyond.

Then Graham Coulton awoke in good earnest, with the perspiration oozing from every pore, with a fear and an agony upon him such as he had never before felt in all his existence, and with the sound of the heart-rending cry—"Oh! my lost life"—still ringing in his ears.

Mingled with all, too, there seemed to have been some lesson for him which he had forgotten, that, try as he would, eluded his memory, and which, in the very act of waking, glided away.

He lay for a little thinking about all this, and then, still heavy with sleep, retraced his way into dreamland once more.

It was natural, perhaps, that, mingling with the strange fantasies which follow in the train of night and darkness, the former vision should recur, and the young man ere long found himself toiling through scene after scene wherein the figure of the woman he had seen seated beside a dying fire held principal place.

He saw her walking slowly across the floor munching a dry crust—she who could have purchased all the luxuries wealth can command; on the hearth, contemplating her, stood a man of commanding presence, dressed in the fashion of long ago. In his

eyes there was a dark look of anger, on his lips a curling smile of disgust, and somehow, even in his sleep, the dreamer understood it was the ancestor to the descendant he beheld—that the house put to mean uses in which he lay had never so far descended from its high estate, as the woman possessed of so pitiful a soul, contaminated with the most despicable and insidious vice poor humanity knows, for all other vices seem to have connection with the flesh, but the greed of the miser eats into the very soul.

Filthy of person, repulsive to look at, hard of heart as she was, he yet beheld another phantom, which, coming into the room, met her almost on the threshold, taking her by the hand, and pleading, as it seemed, for assistance. He could not hear all that passed, but a word now and then fell upon his ear. Some talk of former days; some mention of a fair young mother—an appeal, as it seemed, to a time when they were tiny brother and sister, and the accursed greed for gold had not divided them. All in vain; the hag only answered him as she had answered the children, and the young girls, and the old people in his former vision. Her heart was as invulnerable to natural affection as it had proved to human sympathy. He begged, as it appeared, for aid to avert some bitter misfortune or terrible disgrace, and adamant might have been found more yielding to his prayer. Then the figure standing on the hearth changed to an angel, which folded its wings mournfully over its face, and the man, with bowed head, slowly left the room.

Even as he did so the scene changed again; it was night once more, and the miser wended her way upstairs. From below, Graham Coulton fancied he watched her toiling wearily from step to step. She had aged strangely since the previous scenes. She moved with difficulty; it seemed the greatest exertion for her to creep from step to step, her skinny hand traversing the balusters with slow and painful deliberateness. Fascinated, the young man's eyes followed the progress of that feeble, decrepit woman. She was solitary in a desolate house, with a deeper blackness than the darkness of night waiting to engulf her.

It seemed to Graham Coulton that after that he lay for a time in a still, dreamless sleep, upon awaking from which he found himself entering a chamber as sordid and unclean in its appointments as the woman of his previous vision had been in her person. The poorest labourer's wife would have gathered more comforts

around her than that room contained. A four-poster bedstead without hangings of any kind—a blind drawn up awry—an old carpet covered with dust, and dirt on the floor—a rickety washstand with all the paint worn off it—an ancient mahogany dressing-table, and a cracked glass spotted all over—were all the objects he could at first discern, looking at the room through that dim light which oftentimes obtains in dreams.

By degrees, however, he perceived the outline of someone lying huddled on the bed. Drawing nearer, he found it was that of the person whose dreadful presence seemed to pervade the house.

What a terrible sight she looked, with her thin white locks scattered over the pillow, with what were mere remnants of blankets gathered about her shoulders, with her claw-like fingers clutching the clothes, as though even in sleep she was guarding her gold!

An awful and a repulsive spectacle, but not with half the terror in it of that which followed. Even as the young man looked he heard stealthy footsteps on the stairs. Then he saw first one man and then his fellow steal cautiously into the room. Another second, and the pair stood beside the bed, murder in their eyes.

Graham Coulton tried to shout—tried to move, but the deterrent power which exists in dreams only tied his tongue and paralysed his limbs. He could but hear and look, and what he heard and saw was this: aroused suddenly from sleep, the woman started, only to receive a blow from one of the ruffians, whose fellow followed his lead by plunging a knife into her breast.

Then, with a gurgling scream, she fell back on the bed, and at the same moment, with a cry, Graham Coulton again awoke, to thank heaven it was but an illusion.

Chapter Three

“I hope you slept well, sir.” It was William, who, coming into the hall with the sunlight of a fine bright morning streaming after him, asked this question: “Had you a good night’s rest?”

Graham Coulton laughed, and answered: “Why, faith, I was somewhat in the case of Paddy, ‘who could not slape for dhraming’. I slept well enough, I suppose, but whether it was in

consequence of the row with my dad, or the hard bed, or the cheese—most likely the bread and cheese so late at night—I dreamt all the night long, the most extraordinary dreams. Some old woman kept cropping up, and I saw her murdered.”

“You don’t say that, sir?” said William nervously.

“I do, indeed,” was the reply. “However, that is all gone and past. I have been down in the kitchen and had a good wash, and I am as fresh as a daisy, and as hungry as a hunter; and, oh, William, can you get me any breakfast?”

“Certainly, Master Graham. I have brought round a kettle, and I will make the water boil immediately. I suppose, sir”—this tentatively—“you’ll be going home today?”

“Home!” repeated the young man. “Decidedly not. I’ll never go home again till I return with some medal hung to my coat, or a leg or arm cut off. I’ve thought it all out, William. I’ll go and enlist. There’s a talk of war; and, living or dead, my father shall have reason to retract his opinion about my being a coward.”

“I am sure the admiral never thought you anything of the sort, sir,” said William. “Why, you have the pluck of ten!”

“Not before him,” answered the young fellow sadly.

“You’ll do nothing rash, Master Graham; you won’t go ’listing, or aught of that sort, in your anger?”

“If I do not, what is to become of me?” asked the other. “I cannot dig—to beg I am ashamed. Why, but for you, I should not have had a roof over my head last night.”

“Not much of a roof, I am afraid, sir.”

“Not much of a roof?” repeated the young man. “Why, who could desire a better? What a capital room this is,” he went on, looking around the apartment, where William was now kindling a fire; “one might dine twenty people here easily!”

“If you think so well of the place, Master Graham, you might stay here for a while, till you have made up your mind what you are going to do. The landlord won’t make any objection, I am very sure.”

“Oh! nonsense; he would want a long rent for a house like this.”

“I dare say; *if he could get it*,” was William’s significant answer.

“What do you mean? Won’t the place let?”

“No, sir. I did not tell you last night, but there was a murder

done here, and people are shy of the house ever since.”

“A murder! What sort of a murder? Who was murdered?”

“A woman, Master Graham—the landlord’s sister; she lived here all alone, and was supposed to have money. Whether she had or not, she was found dead from a stab in her breast, and if there ever was any money, it must have been taken at the same time, for none ever was found in the house from that day to this.”

“Was that the reason your wife would not stop here?” asked the young man, leaning against the mantelshelf, and looking thoughtfully down on William.

“Yes, sir. She could not stand it any longer; she got that thin and nervous one would have believed it possible; she never saw anything, but she said she heard footsteps and voices, and then when she walked through the hall, or up the staircase, someone always seemed to be following her. We put the children to sleep in that big room you had last night, and they declared they often saw an old woman sitting by the hearth. Nothing ever came my way,” finished William, with a laugh; “I was always ready to go to sleep the minute my head touched the pillow.”

“Were not the murderers discovered?” asked Graham Coulton.

“No, sir; the landlord, Miss Tynan’s brother, had always lain under the suspicion of it—quite wrongfully, I am very sure—but he will never clear himself now. It was known he came and asked her for help a day or two before the murder, and it was also known he was able within a week or two to weather whatever trouble had been harassing him. Then, you see, the money was never found; and, altogether, people scarce knew what to think.”

“Humph!” ejaculated Graham Coulton, and he took a few turns up and down the apartment. “Could I go and see this landlord?”

“Surely, sir, if you had a hat,” answered William, with such a serious decorum that the young man burst out laughing.

“That is an obstacle, certainly,” he remarked, “and I must make a note do instead. I have a pencil in my pocket, so here goes.”

Within half an hour from the dispatch of that note William was back again with a sovereign; the landlord’s compliments, and he would be much obliged if Mr. Coulton could “step round”.

“You’ll do nothing rash, sir,” entreated William.

“Why, man,” answered the young fellow, “one may as well be picked off by a ghost as a bullet. What is there to be afraid of?”

William only shook his head. He did not think his young master was made of the stuff likely to remain alone in a haunted house and solve the mystery it assuredly contained by dint of his own unassisted endeavours. And yet when Graham Coulton came out of the landlord's house he looked more bright and gay than usual, and walked up the Lambeth Road to the place where William awaited his return, humming an air as he paced along.

"We have settled the matter," he said. "And now if the dad wants his son for Christmas, it will trouble him to find him."

"Don't say that, Master Graham, don't," entreated the man, with a shiver; "maybe after all it would have been better if you had never happened to chance upon Vauxhall Walk."

"Don't croak, William," answered the young man; "if it was not the best day's work I ever did for myself I'm a Dutchman."

During the whole of that forenoon and afternoon, Graham Coulton searched diligently for the missing treasure Mr. Tynan assured him had never been discovered. Youth is confident and self-opinionated, and this fresh explorer felt satisfied that, though others had failed, he would be successful. On the second floor he found one door locked, but he did not pay much attention to that at the moment, as he believed if there was anything concealed it was more likely to be found in the lower than the upper part of the house. Late into the evening he pursued his researches in the kitchen and cellars and old-fashioned cupboards, of which the basement had an abundance.

It was nearly eleven, when, engaged in poking about amongst the empty bins of a wine cellar as large as a family vault, he suddenly felt a rush of cold air at his back. Moving, his candle was instantly extinguished, and in the very moment of being left in darkness he saw, standing in the doorway, a woman, resembling her who had haunted his dreams overnight.

He rushed with outstretched hands to seize her, but clutched only air. He relit his candle, and closely examined the basement, shutting off communication with the ground floor ere doing so. All in vain. Not a trace could he find of living creature—not a window was open—not a door unbolted.

"It is very odd," he thought, as, after securely fastening the door at the top of the staircase, he searched the whole upper portion of the house, with the exception of the one room

mentioned.

"I must get the key of that tomorrow," he decided, standing gloomily with his back to the fire and his eyes wandering about the drawing-room, where he had once again taken up his abode.

Even as the thought passed through his mind, he saw standing in the open doorway a woman with white dishevelled hair, clad in mean garments, ragged and dirty. She lifted her hand and shook it at him with a menacing gesture, and then, just as he was darting towards her, a wonderful thing occurred.

From behind the great mirror there glided a second female figure, at the sight of which the first turned and fled, littering piercing shrieks as the other followed her from storey to storey.

Sick almost with terror, Graham Coulton watched the dreadful pair as they fled upstairs past the locked room to the top of the house.

It was a few minutes before he recovered his self-possession. When he did so, and searched the upper apartments, he found them totally empty.

That night, ere lying down before the fire, he carefully locked and bolted the drawing-room door; before he did more he drew the heavy settle in front of it, so that if the lock were forced no entrance could be effected without considerable noise.

For some time he lay awake, then dropped into a deep sleep, from which he was awakened suddenly by a noise as if of something scuffling stealthily behind the wainscot. He raised himself on his elbow and listened, and, to his consternation, beheld seated at the opposite side of the hearth the same woman he had seen before in his dreams, lamenting over her gold.

The fire was not quite out, and at that moment shot up a last tongue of flame. By the light, transient as it was, he saw that the figure pressed a ghostly finger to its lips, and by the turn of its head and the attitude of its body seemed to be listening.

He listened also—indeed, he was too much frightened to do aught else; more and more distinct grew the sounds which had aroused him, a stealthy rustling coming nearer and nearer—up and up it seemed, behind the wainscot.

"It is rats," thought the young man, though, indeed, his teeth were almost chattering in his head with fear. But then in a moment he saw what disabused him of that idea—the gleam of a candle or lamp

through a crack in the panelling. He tried to rise, he strove to shout—all in vain; and, sinking down, remembered nothing more till he awoke to find the grey light of an early morning stealing through one of the shutters he had left partially unclosed.

For hours after his breakfast, which he scarcely touched, long after William had left him at mid-day, Graham Coulton, having in the morning made a long and close survey of the house, sat thinking before the fire, then, apparently having made up his mind, he put on the hat he had bought, and went out.

When he returned the evening shadows were darkening down, but the pavements were full of people going marketing, for it was Christmas Eve, and all who had money to spend seemed bent on shopping.

It was terribly dreary inside the old house that night. Through the deserted rooms Graham could feel that ghostly semblance was wandering mournfully. When he turned his back he knew she was flitting from the mirror to the fire, from the fire to the mirror; but he was not afraid of her now—he was far more afraid of another matter he had taken in hand that day.

The horror of the silent house grew and grew upon him. He could hear the beating of his own heart in the dead quietude which reigned from garret to cellar.

At last William came; but the young man said nothing to him of what was in his mind. He talked to him cheerfully and hopefully enough—wondered where his father would think he had got to, and hoped Mr. Tynan might send him some Christmas pudding. Then the man said it was time for him to go, and, when Mr. Coulton went downstairs to the hall-door, remarked the key was not in it.

“No,” was the answer, “I took it out today, to oil it.”

“It wanted oiling,” agreed William, “for it worked terribly stiff.” Having uttered which truism he departed.

Very slowly the young man retraced his way to the drawing-room, where he only paused to lock the door on the outside; then taking off his boots he went up to the top of the house, where, entering the front attic, he waited patiently in darkness and in silence.

It was a long time, or at least it seemed long to him, before he heard the same sound which had aroused him on the previous

night—a stealthy rustling—then a rush of cold air—then cautious footsteps—then the quiet opening of a door below.

It did not take as long in action as it has required to tell. In a moment the young man was out on the landing and had closed a portion of the panelling on the wall which stood open; noiselessly he crept back to the attic window, unlatched it, and sprung a rattle, the sound of which echoed far and near through the deserted streets, then rushing down the stairs, he encountered a man who, darting past him, made for the landing above; but perceiving the way of escape closed, fled down again, to find Graham struggling desperately with his fellow.

“Give him the knife—come along,” he said savagely; and next instant Graham felt something like a hot iron through his shoulder, and then heard a thud, as one of the men, tripping in his rapid flight, fell from the top of the stairs to the bottom.

At the same moment there came a crash, as if the house was falling, and faint, sick, and bleeding, young Coulton lay insensible on the threshold of the room where Miss Tynan had been murdered.

When he recovered he was in the dining-room, and a doctor was examining his wound.

Near the door a policeman stiffly kept guard. The hall was full of people; all the misery and vagabondism the streets contain at that hour was crowding in to see what had happened.

Through the midst two men were being conveyed to the station-house; one, with his head dreadfully injured, on a stretcher, the other handcuffed, uttering frightful imprecations as he went.

After a time the house was cleared of the rabble, the police took possession of it, and Mr. Tynan was sent for.

“What was that dreadful noise?” asked Graham feebly, now seated on the floor, with his back resting against the wall.

“I do not know. Was there a noise?” said Mr. Tynan, humouring his fancy, as he thought.

“Yes, in the drawing-room, I think; the key is in my pocket.”

Still humouring the wounded lad, Mr. Tynan took the key and ran upstairs.

When he unlocked the door, what a sight met his eyes! The mirror had fallen—it was lying all over the floor shivered into a thousand pieces; the console table had been borne down by its

weight, and the marble slab was shattered as well. But this was not what chained his attention. Hundreds, thousands of gold pieces were scattered about, and an aperture behind the glass contained boxes filled with securities amid deeds amid bonds, the possession of which had cost his sister her life.

* * * * *

“Well, Graham, and what do you want?” asked Admiral Coulton that evening as his eldest born appeared before him, looking somewhat pale but otherwise unchanged.

“I want nothing,” was the answer, “but to ask your forgiveness. William has told me all the story I never knew before; and, if you let me, I will try to make it up to you for the trouble you have had. I am provided for,” went on the young fellow, with a nervous laugh; “I have made my fortune since I left you, and another man’s fortune as well.”

“I think you are out of your senses,” said the Admiral shortly.

“No, sir, I have found them,” was the answer; “and I mean to strive and make a better thing of my life than I should ever have done had I not gone to the Old House in Vauxhall Walk.”

“Vauxhall Walk! What is the lad talking about?”

“I will tell you, sir, if I may sit down,” was Graham Coulton’s answer, and then he told his story.

Sandy the Tinker

“Before commencing my story, I wish to state it is perfectly true in every particular.”

“We quite understand that,” said the sceptic of our party, who was wont, in the security of friendly intercourse, to characterise all such prefaces as mere introductions to some tremendously exaggerated tale.

On the occasion in question, however, we had donned our best behaviour, a garment which did not sit ungracefully on some of us; and our host, who was about to draw out from the stores of memory one narrative for our entertainment, was scarcely the person before whom even Jack Hill, the sceptic, would have cared to express his cynical and unbelieving views.

We were seated, an incongruous company of ten persons, in the best room of an old manse among the Scottish hills. Accident had thrown us together, and accident had driven us under the minister’s hospitable roof. Cold, wet and hungry, drenched with rain, sorely beaten by the wind, we had crowded through the door opened by a friendly hand, and now, wet no longer, the pangs of hunger assuaged with smoking rashers of ham, poached eggs, and steaming potatoes, we sat around a blazing fire, drinking toddy out of tumblers, whilst the two ladies who graced the assemblage partook of a modicum of the same beverage from wine glasses.

Everything was eminently comfortable, but conducted upon the most correct principles. Jack could no more have taken it upon himself to shock the minister’s ear with some of the opinions he aired in Fleet Street, than he could have asked for more whisky with his water.

“Yes, it is perfectly true,” continued the minister, looking thoughtfully at the fire. “I can’t explain it, I cannot even try to explain it. I will tell you the story exactly as it occurred, however, and leave you to draw your own deductions from it.”

None of us answered. We fell into listening attitudes instantly, and eighteen eyes fixed themselves by one accord upon our host.

He was an old man, but hale. The weight of eighty winters had

whitened his head, but not bowed it. He seemed young as any of us—younger than Jack Hill, who was a reviewer and a newspaper hack, and whose way through life had not been altogether on easy lines.

“Thirty years ago, upon a certain Friday morning in August,” began the minister, “I was sitting at breakfast in the room on the other side of the passage, where you ate your supper, when the servant girl came in with a letter. She said a laddie, all out of breath, had brought it over from Dendeldy Manse. ‘He was bidden to rin a’ the way,’ she went on, ‘and he’s fairly beaten.’

“I told her to make the messenger sit down, and put food before him; and then, when she went to do my bidding, proceeded, I must confess with some curiosity, to break the seal of a missive forwarded in such hot haste.

“It was from the minister at Dendeldy, who had been newly chosen to occupy the pulpit his deceased father occupied for a quarter of a century and more.

“The call from the congregation originated rather out of respect to the father’s memory than any extraordinary liking for the son. He had been reared for the most part in England, and was somewhat distant and formal in his manners; and, though full of Greek and Latin and Hebrew, wanted the true Scotch accent, that goes straight to the heart of those accustomed to the broad, honest, tender Scottish tongue.

“His people were proud of him, but they did not like some of his ways. They could remember him a lad running about the whole country-side, and they could not understand, and did not approve of his holding them at arm’s length, and shutting himself up among his books and refusing their hospitality, and sending out word he was busy when maybe some very decent man wanted speech with him. I had taken it upon myself to point out that I thought he was wrong, and that he would alienate his flock from him. Perhaps it was for this very reason, because I was blunt and plain, he took to me kindly, and never got on his high horse, no matter what I said to him.

“Well, to return to the letter. It was written in the wildest haste, and entreated me not to lose a moment in coming to him, as he was in the very *greatest distress* and *anxiety*. ‘Let *nothing* delay you,’ he proceeded. ‘If I cannot speak to you soon I believe I shall go out

of my senses.'

"What could be the matter?' I thought. 'What in all the wide earth could have happened?'

"I had seen him but a few days before and he was in good health and spirits, getting on better with his people, feeling hopeful of so altering his style of preaching as to touch their hearts more sensibly.

"I must lay aside Southern ideas as well as accent, if I can,' he went on, smiling. 'Men who live such lives of hardship and privation, who cast their seed into the ground under such rigorous skies, and cut their corn in fear and trembling at the end of later, uncertain summers, who take the sheep out of the snowdrifts and carry the lambs into shelter beside their own humble hearths, must want a different sort of sermon from those who sleep softly and walk delicately.'

"I had implied something of all this myself, and it amused me to find my own thoughts come back clothed in different fashion and presented to me quite as strangers. Still, all I wanted was his good, and I felt glad he showed such aptitude to learn.

"What could have happened, however, puzzled me sorely. As I made my hurried preparations for setting out I fairly perplexed myself with speculation. I went into the kitchen, where his messenger was eating some breakfast, and asked if Mr. Crawley was ill.

"I dinna ken,' he answered. 'He mad' no complaint, but he luiked awful bad, just awful.'

"In what way?' I inquired.

"As if he had seen a ghaist,' was the reply.

"This made me very uneasy, and I jumped to the conclusion the trouble was connected with money matters. Young men will be young men." Here the minister looked significantly at the callow bird of our company, a youth who had never owed a sixpence in his life or given away a cent; while Jack Hill—no chicken, by the way—was over head and ears in debt, and could not keep a sovereign in his pocket, though spending or bestowing it involved going dinner-less the next day.

"Young men will be young men," repeated the minister, in his best pulpit manner ("Just as though any one expected them to be young women!" grumbled Jack to me afterwards), "and I feared

that now he was settled and comfortably off some old creditor he had been paying as best he could, might have become pressing. I knew nothing of his liabilities, or, beyond the amount of the stipend paid him, the state of his pecuniary affairs; but, having once in my own life made myself responsible for a debt, I was aware of all the trouble putting your arm out further than you can draw it back involves. And I considered that most probably money, which is the root of all evil" ("and all good" Jack's eyes suggested to me), "was the cause of my young friend's agony of mind. Blessed with a large family—every one of whom is now alive and doing well, I thank God, out in the world—you may imagine I had not much opportunity for laying by. Still, I had put aside a little for a rainy day, and that little I placed in my pocket-book, hoping even a small sum might prove of use in case of emergency."

"Come, you *are* a trump," I saw written plainly on Jack Hill's face; and he settled himself to listen to the remainder of the minister's story in a manner which could not be considered other than complimentary.

Duly and truly I knew quite well he had already devoted the first five-guinea cheque he received to the poor of that minister's parish.

"By the road," proceeded our host, "Dendeldy is distant from here ten long miles, but by a short cut across the hills it can be reached in something under six. For me it was nothing of a walk, and accordingly I arrived at the manse ere noon."

He paused, and, though thirty years had elapsed, drew a handkerchief across his forehead before he continued his narrative.

"I had to climb a steep brae to reach the front door, but before I could breast it my friend met me.

"'Thank God you are come,' he said, pressing my hand in his. 'Oh, I am grateful.'

"He was trembling with excitement. His face was a ghastly pallor. His voice was that of a person suffering from some terrible shock, labouring under some awful fear.

"'What *has* happened, Edward?' I asked. I had known him since he was a little boy. 'I am distressed to see you in such a state. Rouse yourself; be a man; whatever may have gone wrong can possibly be righted. I have come over to do all that lies in my power for you. If it is a matter of money—'

“No, no; it is not money,” he interrupted; “would that it were!” and he began to tremble again so violently that really he communicated some part of his nervousness to me, and put me into a state of perfect terror.

“Whatever it is, Crawley, out with it,” I said; “have you murdered anybody?”

“No, it is worse than that,” he answered.

“But that’s just nonsense,” I declared. “Are you in your right mind, do you think?”

“I wish I were not,” he returned. “I’d like to know I was stark staring mad; it would be happier for me—far, far happier.”

“If you don’t tell me this minute what is the matter, I shall turn on my heel and tramp my way home again,” I said, half in anger at what I thought was his folly.

“Come into the house,” he entreated, “and try to have patience with me; for indeed, Mr. Morison, I am sorely troubled. I have been through my deep waters, and they have gone clean over my head.”

“We went into his little study and sat down. For a while he remained silent, his head resting upon his hand, struggling with some strong emotion; but after about five minutes he asked in a low subdued voice:

“Do you believe in dreams?”

“What has my belief to do with the matter in hand?” I inquired.

“It is a dream, an awful dream, that is troubling me.”

“I rose from my chair.

“Do you mean to say,” I asked, “you have brought me from my business and my parish to tell me you have had a bad dream?”

“That is just what I do mean to say,” he answered. “At least it was not a dream—it was a vision; no, I don’t mean a vision—I can’t tell you what it was; but nothing I ever went through in actual life was half so real, and I have bound myself to go through it all again. There is no hope for me, Mr. Morison. I sit before you a lost creature, the most miserable man on the face of the whole earth.”

“What did you dream?” I inquired.

“A dreadful fit of trembling again seized him; but at last he managed to say:

“I have been like this ever since, and I shall be like this for

evermore, till—till—the end comes.’

“‘When did you have your bad dream?’ I asked.

“‘Last night, or rather this morning,’ he answered. ‘I’ll tell you all about it. I was as well when I went to bed about eleven o’clock as ever I was in my life. I had been considering my sermon and felt satisfied I should be able to deliver a good one next Sunday morning. I had taken nothing after my tea and I lay down in my bed feeling at peace with all mankind, and satisfied with my lot.

How long I slept, or what I dreamt about at first, if I dreamt at all, I don’t know; but after a time the mists seemed to clear from before my eyes, to roll away like clouds from a mountain summit, and I found myself walking on a beautiful summer’s evening beside the River Deldy.’

“He paused for a moment, and an irrepressible shudder shook his frame.

“‘Go on,’ I said, for I felt afraid of his breaking down again.

“He looked at me pitifully, with a hungry entreaty in his weary eyes, and continued.

“‘It was a lovely evening and I never thought the earth had looked so beautiful before. I walked on and on, till I came to that point where, as you may perhaps remember, the path, growing very narrow, winds round the base of a great crag, and leads the wayfarer suddenly into a little green amphitheatre, bounded on one side by the river, and on the other by rocks, that rise in places sheer to a height of a hundred feet or more.’

“‘I remember it,’ I said; ‘a little farther on three streams meet and fall with a tremendous roar into the Witches’ Cauldron. A fine sight in the winter time, only there is scarce any reaching it from below, as the path you mention and the little green oasis are mostly covered with water.’

“‘I had not been there before since I was a child,’ he went on mournfully, ‘but I recollected it as one of the most solitary spots possible; and my astonishment was great, to see a man standing in the pathway, with a drawn sword in his hand. He did not stir as I drew near, so I stepped aside on the grass. Instantly he barred my way.

“‘“You can’t pass here,” he said.

“‘“Why not?”’ I asked.

“‘“Because I say so,” he answered.

“““And who are you that say so?” I inquired, looking full at him.

““He was like a god. Majesty and power were written on every feature, were expressed in every gesture. But, oh, the awful scorn of his smile, the contempt with which he regarded me! The beams of the setting sun fell full upon him, and seemed to bring out, as in letters of fire, the wickedness and terrible beauty of his face.

““I felt afraid; but I managed to say:

“““Stand out of my way, the river bank is as free to me as to you.”

“““Not this part of it,” he answered; “this place belongs to me.”

“““Very well,” I agreed, for I did not want to stand there bandying words with him, and a sudden darkness seemed to be falling around. “It is getting late, and so I’ll e’en turn back.”

““He gave a laugh, the like of which never fell on human ear before, and made reply:

“““You can’t turn back—of your own free will you have come on my ground and from it there is no return.”

““I did not speak; I only just turned round and made as fast as I could for the path at the foot of the crag. He did not pass me, yet before I could reach the point I desired he stood barring my progress, with the scornful smile still on his lips, and his gigantic form assuming tremendous proportions in the narrow way.

“““Let me pass,” I entreated, “and I will never come here again, never trespass more on your ground.”

“““No, you shall not pass.”

“““Who are you that takes such power on yourself?” I asked.

“““Come closer, and I will tell you,” he said.

““I drew a step nearer, and he spoke one word. I never heard it before, but, by some extraordinary intuition, I knew what it meant. He was the Evil One. The name seemed to be taken up by the echoes, and repeated from rock to rock and crag to crag. The whole air seemed full of that one word—and then a great horror of darkness came about us, only the place where we stood remained light. We occupied a small circle walled round with the thick blackness of night.

“““You must come with me,” he said.

““I refused; and then he threatened me. I implored and entreated and wept, but at last I agreed to do what he wanted if he

would promise to let me return. Again he laughed, and said, Yes, I should return—and the rocks and trees and mountains, ay, and the very rivers, seemed to take up the answer and bear it in sobbing whispers away into the darkness.’

“He stopped, and lay back in his chair, shivering like one in an ague fit.

“‘Go on,’ I repeated again, ‘it was only a dream, you know.’

“‘Was it?’ he murmured, mournfully. ‘Ah, you have not heard the end of it yet.’

“‘Let me hear it then,’ I said. ‘What happened afterwards?’

“‘The darkness seemed in part to clear away and we walked side by side across the grass in the twilight, straight up to the bare, black wall of rock. With the hilt of his sword he struck a heavy blow, and the solid rock opened as though it were a door. We passed through and it closed behind us with a tremendous clang—yes, it closed behind us’; and at that point he fairly broke down, crying and sobbing as I had never seen a man even in the most frightful grief cry and sob before.”

The minister paused in his narrative. At that moment there came a tremendous blast of wind which shook the windows of the manse, and burst open the hall door, and caused the candles to flicker and the fire to go roaring up the chimney. It is not too much to say that, what with the uncanny story, and the howling storm, we all felt that creeping sort of uneasiness which so often seems like the touch of something from another world—a hand stretched across the boundary-line of time and eternity, the coldness and mystery of which make the stoutest heart tremble.

“I am telling you this tale,” said Mr. Morison, resuming his seat after a brief absence to see that the fastenings of the house were properly attended to, “exactly as I heard it. You must draw your own deductions from the facts I put before you. Part of that great and terrible region in which he found himself, my friend went on to tell me, he penetrated, compelled by a power he could not resist, to see the most awful sights and the most frightful sufferings. There was no form of vice that had not there its representative. As they moved along, his companion told him the special sin for which such horrible punishment was being inflicted. Shuddering, and in mortal agony, he was unable to withdraw his eyes from the dreadful spectacle. The atmosphere grew more unendurable, the

sights more and more terrible, the cries, groans, blasphemies more awful and heartrending.

“‘I can bear no more,’ he gasped at last; ‘let me go!’

“With a mocking laugh, the Presence beside him answered the appeal; a laugh which was taken up, even by the lost and anguished spirits around. ‘There is no return’ said the pitiless voice.

“‘But you promised,’ he cried, ‘you promised me faithfully.’

“‘What are promises here?’ and the words were the sound of doom.

“Still he prayed and entreated; he fell on his knees and in his agony spoke words that seemed to cause the purpose of the Evil One to falter.

“‘You shall go,’ he said, ‘on one condition: that you agree to return to me on Wednesday next—or send a substitute.’

“‘I could not do that,’ said my friend. ‘I could not send any fellow-creature here. Better stop myself than do that.’

“‘Then stop,’ said Satan, with the bitterest contempt; and he was turning away when the poor distracted soul asked for a minute more before he made his choice.

“He was in an awful strait: on the one hand, how could he remain himself? on the other, how could he doom another to such fearful torments? Who could he send? Who would come? And then suddenly there flashed into his mind the thought of an old man to whom it could not signify much whether he took up his place in this abode a few days sooner or a few days later. He was travelling to it as fast as he knew how. He was the reprobate of the parish; the sinner without hope that successive ministers had striven in vain to reclaim from the error of his ways; a man marked and doomed—Sandy the Tinker. Sandy, who was mostly drunk and always godless; Sandy, who, it was said, believed in nothing, and gloried in his infidelity; Sandy, whose soul really did not signify much. He would send him. Lifting his eyes, he saw those of his tormentor surveying him scornfully.

“‘Well, have you made your choice?’ he asked.

“‘Yes, I think I can send a substitute,’ was the hesitating answer.

“‘See you do then,’ was the reply; ‘for if you do not, and fail to return yourself, *I shall come for you*. Wednesday, remember, before midnight.’ And with these words ringing in his ears he was flung violently through the rock, and found himself in the middle of his

bedroom floor, as if he had just been kicked there.”

“This is not the end of the story, is it?” asked one of our party, as the minister came to a full stop, and looked earnestly at the fire.

“No,” he answered, “it is not the end; but before proceeding I must ask you to bear carefully in mind the circumstances already recounted. Especially remember the date mentioned—*Wednesday next, before midnight*.

“Whatever I thought, and you may think, about my friend’s dream, it made the most remarkable impression upon *his* mind. He could not shake off its influence; he passed from one state of nervousness to another. It was in vain I entreated him to exert his common sense, and call all his strength of mind to his assistance. I might as well have spoken to the wind. He implored me not to leave him, and I agreed to remain. Indeed, to leave him in his then frame of mind would have been an act of the greatest cruelty. He wanted me also to preach in his place on the Sunday following; but this I flatly refused.

“‘If you do not make an effort now,’ I said, ‘you will never make it. Rouse yourself; get on with your sermon, and if you buckle down to work you will soon forget all about that foolish dream.’

“Well, to cut a long story short, the sermon was somehow composed and Sunday came, and my friend, a little better and getting over his fret, walked up into the pulpit to preach. He looked dreadfully ill; but I thought the worst was over now and that he would go on mending.

“Vain hope! He gave out the text and then looked over the congregation—and the first person on whom his eyes lighted was Sandy the Tinker. Sandy, who had never before been known to enter a place of worship of any sort; Sandy, whom he had mentally chosen as his substitute, and who was due on the following Wednesday—sitting just below him, quite sober, and comparatively clean, waiting with a great show of attention for the opening words of the sermon.

“With a terrible cry my friend caught the front of the pulpit, then swayed back and fell down in a fainting fit. He was carried home and a doctor sent for. I said a few words, addressed apparently to the congregation, but really to Sandy, for my heart somehow came into my mouth at the sight of him. And then, after

I had dismissed the people, I paced slowly back to the manse, almost afraid of what might meet me.

"Mr. Crawley was not dead; but he was in the most dreadful state of physical exhaustion and mental agitation. It was dreadful to hear him. How could he go himself? How could he send Sandy?—poor old Sandy whose soul, in the sight of God, was just as precious as his own.

"His whole cry was for us to deliver him from the Evil One; to save him from committing a sin which would render him a wretched man for life. He counted the hours and the minutes before he must return to that horrible place.

"I can't send Sandy,' he would moan. 'I cannot. Oh, I cannot save myself at such a price!'

"And then he would cover his face with the bedclothes, only to start up and wildly entreat me not to leave him; to stand between the enemy and himself, to save him, or, if that were impossible, to give him the courage to do what was right.

"If this continues,' said the doctor, 'Wednesday will find him either dead or a raving lunatic.'

"We talked the matter over, the doctor and I, as we walked to and fro in the meadow behind the manse; and we decided, having to make our choice of two evils, to risk giving him such an opiate as should carry him over the dreaded interval. We knew it was a perilous thing to do even with one in his condition, but, as I said before, we could only take the lesser of two evils.

"What we dreaded most was his awaking before the time expired, so I kept watch beside him. He lay like one dead through the whole of Tuesday night and Wednesday and Wednesday evening. Eight, nine, ten, eleven o'clock came and passed—then twelve. 'God be thanked!' I said, as I stooped over him and heard he was breathing quietly.

"He will do now, I hope,' said the doctor, who had come in just before midnight, 'You will stay with him till he wakes?'

"I promised that I would and in the beautiful dawn of a summer's morning he opened his eyes and smiled. He had no recollection then of what had occurred; he was as weak as an infant and when I bade him try to go to sleep again turned on his pillow and sank to rest once more.

"Worn out with watching, I stepped softly from the room and

passed into the fresh, sweet air. I strolled down to the garden gate, and stood looking at the great mountains and the fair country, and the Deldy wandering like a silver thread through the green fields below.

“All at once my attention was attracted by a group of people coming slowly along the road leading from the hills. I could not at first see that in their midst something was being borne on men’s shoulders; but when at last I made this out, I hurried to meet them and learn what was the matter.

“‘Has there been an accident?’ I asked, as I drew near.

“They stopped and one man came towards me.

“‘Ay,’ he said, ‘the warst accident that could befa’ him, puir fella. He’s deid.’

“‘Who is it?’ I asked, pressing forward; and lifting the cloth they had flung over his face, I saw *Sandy the Tinker*!

“‘He had been coming home, I tak’ it,’ remarked one who stood by, ‘puir Sandy, and gaed over the cliff afore he could save himself. We found him just on this side of the Witches’s Caldron, where there’s a bonny strip of green turf, and his cuddy was feeding on the hill top with the bit cart behind her.’

There was silence for a minute—then one of the ladies said softly, “Poor Sandy.”

“And what became of Mr. Crawley?” asked the other.

“He gave up his parish and went abroad as a missionary. He is still living.”

“What a most extraordinary story!” I remarked.

“Yes, *I* think so,” said the minister. “If you like to go round by Deldy tomorrow, my son, who now occupies the manse, would show you the scene of the occurrence.”

The next day we all stood looking at the frowning cliff and at the Deldy, swollen by recent rains, rushing on its way. The youngest of the party went up to the rock and knocked upon it loudly with his cane.

“Oh, don’t do that, pray!” cried both the ladies nervously—the spirit of the weird story still brooded over us.

“What do you think of the coincidence, Jack?” I inquired of my friend, as we talked apart from the others.

“Ask me when we get back to Fleet Street,” he answered.

Old Mrs Jones

Chapter One

There could not have been found in his parish, which was a large one, a prouder or happier man than Richard Tippens, on the day when he took possession of the house which had been tenanted by Doctor Jones.

Never a better fellow drew breath than Mr. Richard Tippens. A good son, a loving husband, a fond father, his worst enemy could only say of him he had two faults—one, a tendency to be extra generous; the other, a perhaps undue fondness for an extra glass. But, earning money by the pocketful, as Dick did in those days, when there were fewer cabs and buses than at present, no tramcars, no Metropolitan or daylight route railway, to be free-handed seemed a virtue rather than a sin; whilst a man who had to be out in all weathers, and the period of whose meals was as uncertain as the climate, could scarcely be blamed for yielding to the solicitations of sporting or commercial-gent fares, and his own inclination, in the matter of little “gos” of rum and half-quarters of gin, and whisky cold without, or with “just a drop of hot water and one lump of sugar, my dear, as my fingers is stiff with cold.”

Mr. Tippens was a cheery fellow, with a jolly, honest, laughing face, merciful to the cattle he drove, proud of his newly-painted cab, of his silver-plated harness, of a fresh horse he had just bought, and—oh, far, far prouder of all—of having got the old house which Doctor Jones lived in, for so many a long and wicked year, for a mere song in the way of rent. It was precisely the sort of place he had been looking out for, he could scarcely remember how long; an old-fashioned house—not a grand old-fashioned house altogether above their position, but a rambling, ramshackle building, with a wide staircase, and lots of cupboards, and plenty of rooms they could let off to great advantage, and large cellars, and a paved yard at the back, where were also stables, and coach-house, and lofts, and wash-house, and brew-house, and ever so many other odd little places, telling unconsciously of the time when people, and things, and ways were different from what they

are now; when wood enough for the whole winter had to be laid in at once, and bread was baked at home, and flitches of bacon were laid in the racks, and such modern innovations as tradesmen calling every day for orders, ladies only spending about thirty minutes a week in their kitchens, and no mistress's store-room, were matters still undreamt of.

"It is a splendid house," Mr. Richard Tippens joyfully exclaimed, when, opening the door with his own key, he walked into the premises with the old creature who was to do the repairs for him.

"Fit for any gentleman," capped the person in question, the accuracy of whose ideas on any social subject of that sort was indeed open to doubt, for he had only one definite notion on earth, and that was beer. His point of view was the nearest tap, and any road which led to the desired haven seemed to him filled with better company than the Row in the season.

He had been in a yard where Dick Tippens, then owning no horses of his own, was fain to work under a cab proprietor.

"I have known poor old Mickey," Dick was wont to say, "for a matter of thirty years, on and off you know, and ever since I was as high as that," and the great burly fellow would indicate a height a child of five might have scoffed at. But Dick did not add how many a six-pence, and shilling, and half-crown, and good warm dinner had found their way to old Mickey since he met with the accident (when he was drunk) which made him for ever after a dependent on the charity of the ratepayers and the liberality of those who could remember him when he was earning from "thirty-three to forty bob a week, besides gettings." That Mickey, while in receipt of this princely income, might have put aside a trifle to help him over that rainy day, induced by "the cussedest brute that ever lashed out without a sign of warning," was an idea which never seemed to occur either to the various relieving officers he was under or to the many friends who "stood treat."

Neither was any weight attached to the horse's view of the question. Michael himself would have liked his own toilet performed with the end of a pitchfork, which was the implement he had taken up, apparently under the impression it was a curry-comb, nobody inquired. All his own public considered was that Mickey, once the weekly recipient of "thirty-three to forty bob and

gettings,” which latter item probably amounted to as much more, had to go on the parish and feel thankful for half-crowns from the Board, and such odd jobs as Heaven, more merciful than the abhorred Board, put in his way.

For the rest he was a drunken, dissolute, lying, discontented, carneying old vagabond, who thrived on the kindness and folly of men like Dick Tippens, who likewise was not laying by a farthing but spending such of his superfluous cash as did not go in the best of good eating and drinking and smoking in the purchase of useless articles of various kinds, in fine household linen and damask, in a large stock of clothes for himself, which he could not possibly wear out before they grew old-fashioned, in shawls and dresses for his wife, each and all destined eventually to find their way to the pawnbroker as surely and infallibly as the sparks fly upwards.

For apparently a mere trifle, “just a bite of food, or a half-pint of beer, or an old pair of cast-off boots, or a coat you don’t care to be seen about in any longer yourself, even in the worst of weather,” thus, “poor old Mickey”; “or just whatever you are pleased to give me; or nothing at all, Mr. Tippens. I’ll make the place clean and sweet for you. There is little here I can’t do, except maybe the roof and a bit of bricklaying, that needs standing on a high ladder, or the pipes mending, or the gutter seeing to; but leave that all to me, plenty will be glad to earn a shilling or two, and I know where to go to look for them; don’t you trouble yourself at all. Which had we best make a start with, the house, d’ye think, or the yard?”

Mr. Tippens thought the house. Once he was on the premises he could see to a bit of the loft and stables himself, and give Mike a helping hand; and his wife was all agog to get in, and put the place to rights while the fine weather lasted; and he had some fresh lodgers now, only waiting till he could take them in; and the children, poor things, were wild at the thought of the yard and the out-buildings.

“And fine children they are too,” answered the worthy Michael; “but there, what would hinder them? You’re not an ill-favoured man yourself, Mr. Tippens, and I mind the time when all the girls were setting their caps at you, and the like of your wife for beauty never stepped. The very sight of her seems to do my old eyes good,

like the sunshine on a bright May morning. She always minds me somehow of primroses and violets and bluebells, and the scent of the wallflowers that used to grow along on the low wall of my father's garden down in Surrey," and as he uttered these poetical similes, Michael's watery eyes wistfully followed the movements of Mr. Tippens's right hand while it fumbled in his pocket for a shilling, to bestow on the "poor old fellow, who had neither chick nor child, nor one belonging to him."

The expenditure of whitewash in that house was something awful; Westminster Abbey or the Tower of London could scarcely have required a larger outlay in whiting.

"You have no idea," said Mike, "of the quantity of wash them ceilings needs"—which, indeed, Mr. Tippens had not—floors, walls, and Mickey himself also received coat after coat; and the dust, according to the ex-helper's account, was so awful he was forced to keep a pot of beer constantly beside him, in one of the cupboards, to take a sip of at frequent intervals to prevent his choking.

At last, however, even Mike felt it would be dangerous any longer to defer announcing the completion of the repairs. He was brought to this state of mind by a visit from Mrs. Tippens, who, after declaring in tones not much like the birds in spring that she could have done the work herself in a quarter of the time, said, "Done or undone, she meant to have the 'cleaning' begun on the following Monday," when she requested the favour of Mike's room instead of his company.

She saw clearly enough that individual was in a fuddled state, and whether the intoxication was produced by beer, or gin, or whitewash, or the lead in the paint, did not signify to her; even the praise of her children only elicited the answer that they were "well enough," and a more elaborate tribute to her own charms failed to soften the asperity with which she told him to "hold his tongue."

"I expect that Mickey has taken you in nicely, Dick," she said to her husband that night.

"Oh, it hasn't cost me so much," answered Mr. Tippens easily; "there was a whole lot of things to do."

As indeed he found when the rainy months and the snow came, and the water poured from the spouts, all of which leaked, and the wet soaked through the broken tiles that had never been replaced;

and it was found necessary to open all the drains.

Long before winter arrived, however, Mrs. Tippens discovered that not a lock or bolt in the house worked properly; that the paint had only been smeared on the woodwork; that the whole of the repairs, in fact, had consisted in further dilapidation of the coats of Mr. Mike's stomach; and that almost all the money paid by her husband for "labour," "material," "extra help," "hire of ladders," "use of pulley," and so forth, had been spent over the counter of the "Guy Faux" tavern, situated round a near and convenient corner.

Meeting Mike one day, her just indignation found utterance, and, with feminine frankness, she reproached him for having deceived a man who had been so kind to him as her husband. Mrs. Tippens was in no sense of the word a shrew, but she could upon occasion speak out her mind, and on this occasion she did speak it very plainly.

Mike never attempted to deny the charge, he only tried to turn it into a victory by a strategic movement likely to divert her attention.

"What was the use," asked the hoary sinner, "of spending good money fitting a house up like a palace I knew you would never be able to live in?"

"What would hinder us living in it?" retorted Mrs. Tippens, more in the way of comment than inquiry.

"What would hinder you?—Why old Mrs. Jones, to be sure; she'll never let anybody live in the house till her bones are dug up out of the hole where her husband buried her."

"Oh, don't talk to me of your Mrs. Joneses!" exclaimed Mrs. Tippens, to whom the names was evidently not new. "At any rate, I never did any harm to the woman—never saw her, to my knowledge, so it's not likely she would come troubling me."

"She troubles everybody that tries to live in the house you're so set up with. Why, the last people did not stop a fortnight. It's well known she walks the place over, from the second floor down; and, if you take my advice, you won't go into the back-cellar alone after night."

Chapter Two

It was Sunday evening. Mr. Tippens sat on one side of the fire and his wife on the other. They had partaken of tea, and it was not yet quite time for supper; the children were abed, three of them in a little room at the end of the passage Doctor Jones had used as a surgery, while the baby was, for a wonder, fast asleep in its cradle, which stood in a dark corner behind Mrs. Tippens's chair. The horses had long been fed and littered down. Mr. Tippens always took a look at them last thing, but last thing would not be yet for an hour or more. The house was as quiet as the grave, and through the smoke caused by his pipe Richard Tippens, with a delightful sense of well-being, and doing, and feeling, dreamily regarded his wife, who was certainly an extremely pretty woman, possessing further the reputation of being an extraordinarily good manager; neat in her own person, she always kept her children clean and tidy and well dressed; her rooms were regularly swept and scrubbed, and hearthstoned and blackleaded; she mended her husband's clothes, and sewed on his buttons, and with the help of a woman who came in to "char," as it is generally called, did the family washing and the family ironing; she was a very fair cook, not in the least lazy—quite the contrary, indeed—and yet, if I may venture to say so, in the teeth of public opinion, which always favours women of her type, I do not think she was a good manager, for she spent up to the hilt of her income, whatever that might be. She was always considering how to increase her "gettings," but she never gave a thought as to how she might save them.

Her husband gave her a liberal allowance, and brought home from outlying regions, where he saw such articles marked up cheap, fowls, fish, necks of mutton, vegetables, and other welcome helps to housekeeping. She had a house full of regularly paying lodgers, who found their own latch-keys, and required no attendance. She took in needlework, at which, as she got it by favour, she was able to make a considerable amount of money—and yet, if she had told the truth to her own heart, she would have said, "We are not one bit better off than we were when Dick only gave me a pound certain every week, and paid the rent."

It is a pity someone, thoroughly up in financial questions, does not inform us why uncertain incomes lead almost invariably to

extravagant living.

Your true economist, your excellent manager, your incomparable financier, is a labourer at a given weekly wage, a clerk on starvation salary, the lady left with the poorest of limited incomes. The moment "gettings," in any shape, enter into the question economy retires, worsted, from the contest. "You have got so much to-day, you may get so much more to-morrow," that is the reasoning. Now, why cannot the "gettings" be put aside? Why cannot they be left like an egg in the nest for more to be laid? We know, of course, they never are; but why is it?

Among my own somewhat varied acquaintances, I number, at this moment of writing, two persons—one, a lady whose income, all told, does not reach a hundred a year; on this amount she pays the rent of her rooms, she lives, she dresses; she is not young, and her health requires some few luxuries; yet she is never in debt, and she has always a trifle to spare for those who may be sick or sorry. The other is a youth who I do not think has yet counted eighteen summers; his health is perfect, his rank does not necessitate other than the most moderate expenditure for a bed; his hat covers his family; when he visits, his toilet is easily and perfectly made with a clean collar and a fancy tie; his weekly income has been from thirty to five-and-thirty shillings a week and "gettings"; and yet, lately, when he had been four days out of work, with the certainty of getting into work again on the next day but one, he had to pawn his watch!

Most certainly political economists of the age now coming towards us will find few more difficult questions to deal with than this of "gettings." Were an angel to descend from Heaven tonight and tell Mrs. Tippens what I know, that "gettings" had been the curse of herself, her husband, and her children, she would not believe him; so it would be worse than folly for me to speak—even if not cruel impertinence—now the inevitable end has come: the parish; the philanthropic society, the ever-decreasing bounty for which she is able to make interest; such casual help as she can get, and such work as she is able to obtain.

But no one that evening, looking at her and her husband, as they sat beside the fire, at the comfortable, well-furnished room, the bright blaze, the clean-swept hearth, could possibly have thought evil days were looming in the distance for both husband

and wife. He, the picture of health and strength; she, a slight and still apparently quite young woman, with a refined style of beauty, and a cast of features altogether unusual in her rank. When her voice was not upraised and her temper tried, both of which had been the case during her encounter with that arch-hypocrite Mike, her mode of speaking accorded with the pure and delicate lines of her countenance. In truth, she had been well brought up, and from her youth knew how, with propriety, to address ladies—*real* ladies, as she was sometimes almost too careful to add; and since her marriage she had kept herself to herself; and in her own home, her children, her relations, and her husband found all the interest and society she required.

“Dick,” she said, after they had sat in silence for some little time.

“I’m here, Luce,” he answered; “what is it, my girl?”

“You never told me this house was haunted.”

“I told you people said it was haunted,” he answered, “and you laughed at the idea; because, as you wisely remarked, ‘when once people are buried they’ve done with this world, surely.’”

“But that’s just what we don’t know—whether old Mrs. Jones was ever buried or not.”

“We don’t know whether she is dead or not, for that matter.”

“Then if she’s not dead, where can she be?”

“And if Doctor Jones isn’t dead, where can he be?” retorted Mr. Tippens.

“There’s dreadful things said about this house, Dick.”

“Well, you just turn a deaf ear to them, and they won’t break your night’s rest. What’s Doctor or Mrs. Jones to us? He was a bad man, we know; and she, if all accounts may be trusted, was a bit of a shrew, and held a tight grip on the money, which he married her for. He did not take her for her good looks, I’m sure; for a plainer, more ordinary woman you couldn’t have met in a day’s walk in London. She was more like a witch than anything else—a little bit of a woman, with eyes like black beads, and a face the colour of mahogany; but there—I’ve described her before, Luce, and I think we might find something pleasanter to talk about now.”

“But they say, Dick—they do, indeed—she walks the house, and—”

“Pack of rubbish,” interrupted Mr. Tippens warmly; “who says

it—at least, who says it to you?”

“Why, mostly everybody—the baker, and the bootmaker down the street, and Mike—”

“She didn’t hinder *him* staying in the house, at any rate,” commented Dick.

“Well, Mr. Mowder lived here, you know.”

“And he was turned out because he wouldn’t pay a farthing of rent.”

“He says,” persisted Mrs. Tippens resolutely; “there was always like a cold air in the passage.”

“You can’t expect the hall to feel exactly sultry with those great underground kitchens and cellars. I’ve a mind to put a few spikes in the door, and so shut the whole of those caverns off the rest of the house.”

“But then, Dick, dear, what should we and our lodgers do about coals?”

“Aye, there you go,” observed Dick. “Every woman’s alike; the moment a man makes a suggestion, she’s sure to raise some difficulty. Then I won’t nail up the door; will that meet your views, Mrs. Tippens?”

“Now, Dick, don’t let us quarrel,” entreated his better half; “there was enough of quarreling here, if all accounts be true, in the Joneses time, without our beginning the same game, and—”

He did not let her finish the sentence, he took his pipe out of his mouth, and drew his chair nearer to where she sat, and put his arm round her waist, and drew her head down on his shoulder, and stroked her hair tenderly, and said, “No fear of that, old girl—ghosts or no ghosts; Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Anybodyelse, we’ll not take to quarrelling. Only, you see, I don’t want you to be listening to foolish stories and the envious talk of people who, maybe, think we’re getting on a bit too fast in the world. The house suits me and my business well, and I can’t afford to have you set against it, and, likely as not, wanting to leave, and me bound for the rent for three years. Mind that, my lass,” and he gave her a kiss so loud and hearty, neither of them heard the opening of the front door till the sound of several voices caused Mr. Tippens to exclaim:

“What noise is that, Luce?”

“The Pendells coming in,” she answered; “they’ve her brother and sister with them up from the country.”

"It's about getting on for supper time, then, isn't it, Luce?" asked Mr. Tippens tentatively. He was always ready for his meals on a Sunday, perhaps because he did not take out his cab and had nothing to do.

"Yes, I'll bring it in now," answered his wife; and as she spoke she passed into a lean-to, opening off the sitting-room, which she had metamorphosed into a tiny kitchen, perhaps to avoid the dark loneliness of those underground regions Mr. Tippens well described as caverns.

She had provided a nice little meal, and she looked pretty and graceful as she flitted backwards and forwards, fetching one dish and then another.

"Why, girl, this is a supper fit for the Lord Mayor," said Mr. Tippens, looking approvingly at the contents of the table; "I don't think the Queen herself——"

What he was going to say concerning Victoria by the Grace of God will never now be known, for when he arrived at this point in his sentence there echoed through the silent house a shriek, which brought both husband and wife to their feet, followed by a thud, as of something heavy falling to the ground.

"Lord bless and save us!" exclaimed Mr. Tippens, and seizing a light he rushed out into the passage, followed by his wife.

It was a strangely built house; there were only six steps to the first landing, where was a cupboard in the wall which Mrs. Pendell used as a sort of pantry; half-way down this landing there were three steps more, and then the flight that led direct to the rooms where the Pendells lived.

As Dick Tippens and his wife ran up the half-dozen steps leading from the hall, a posse of people came hurrying pell-mell from the upper part of the house. "What is it? What has happened? Is it thieves? Is the house on fire?" No, the house was not on fire, neither had thieves set themselves at the unprofitable task of effecting an entry; it was only that on the landing Mrs. Pendell lay in the dearest faint woman ever fell into, a large dish she had evidently just taken out of the cupboard smashed to atoms beside her, and the remnants of the joint the family had operated upon in the middle of the day a few steps down, where it had rolled when she dropped the dish.

Everything possible and impossible the house contained was

brought to revive Mrs. Pendell; everybody was talking at once, and each individual had some pet theory to account for the phenomenon.

"I told her she was a-overdoing of it," said her husband, a slow, florid, phlegmatic, pig-headed sort of man. "Didn't I, Bill? Didn't I say to her just on this side of Whitechapel Church, 'you've been a-over-doing it, Mary, you'll have a turn of them spasms to-morrow'?"

Meantime, the subject of these remarks had been carried into the inner chamber and laid on her bed, where every recognised experimental and favourite personal expedient was tried in order to restore her to consciousness; she was "poor deared," her dress was unfastened and her stays loosened, smelling salts of every degree of strength were held to her nostrils, burnt feathers thrust almost up her nose, her hands slapped, cold water dabbed on her forehead, an attempt made to get some brandy down her throat, with various other ingenious efforts at torture, which almost drove Mrs. Tippens, who was in the main a very sensible woman, distracted.

"If you'd only leave her to me and Susie," she said; "there's not a breath of air in the room, with so many standing about the bed and the doorway. She'll be right enough after a little, if you'll only not crowd about her, and let me open the windows."

"She's right," observed Mr. Pendell, from the doorway. "Come along, all of you, Mrs. Tippens knows what's what."

Mrs. Pendell, however, was so long in justifying this flattering eulogy in Mrs. Tippens's favour, that Susie, the sister, who had come up to see her, was just asking if it would not be better to send Bob for the nearest doctor, when Mrs. Tippens, raising her hand to enforce silence, said:

"Sh—sh—she's coming to now."

There was a pause, a pin might have been heard drop, so silent and eager and expectant were the two watchers; then Mrs. Pendell, recovering, opened her eyes a very little, and Mrs. Tippens, holding her left hand, and softly rubbing it, said:

"Don't be frightened, dear, it's only me."

"What is it? Where am I?" murmured Mrs. Pendell, adding suddenly, with a gesture of the extremest terror, "Oh! I remember. Keep her away from me, Mrs. Tippens! Mrs. Tippens, won't you

keep her away—that dreadful woman, you know?”

“She’s a bit light-headed,” said her sister; “I’m sure Bob had better go for the doctor.”

“I don’t think there’s any need,” answered Mrs. Tippens, quietly enough, though her very heart seemed to stand still at the words. “There’s nobody shall come near you, dear, but Susie and me. Don’t be looking about the room that way—indeed, there’s no one here but your sister and myself.”

“She has long grey hair streaming over her shoulders. Oh, the wickedest face I ever did see! I know her well, don’t you, Mrs. Tippens?”

“Yes, yes, dear; but never mind her now; keep yourself quiet.”

“She must be the smallest woman in the world,” this after a moment’s silence; “when I turned from the cupboard I felt like a rush of cold air, and then she stood on the top step but one.”

“I think she *would* be the better for some sort of quieting draught,” remarked Mrs. Tippens, *sotto voce* to Susan Hay—and it is no disparagement of a courageous woman’s courage to say, after Susie left the room she looked fearfully around, while Mrs. Pendell rambled on about the dreadful sight which had struck her down like one dead.

“I have seen people in their coffins, who didn’t look half so deathlike,” she whispered; “she was that dark, and her face and her eyes were so fierce, and her arms so shrivelled, and her hands so like claws going to make a clutch at me; and she had a red mark round her throat, as if she had been wearing a necklace too tight.”

“Did she say anything to you?” Mrs. Tippens forced herself to ask.

“No; she was just going to speak when I screamed out with horror. Shall I ever forget her?—ever—ever!” and she buried her head despairingly in the pillow.

“Well, Polly, lass, how do you find yourself now?” said Mr. Pendell, coming into the room at this juncture, and causing a welcome diversion at least to Mrs. Tippens’s fancy. “You’re getting all right now, aren’t you? Ah, I felt afraid what was coming; did I say to you, or did I not, on this side of Whitechapel Church, ‘You’ve been a-overdoing of it, Mary; you’ll have a turn of them spasms to-morrow?’”

For answer Mary only put her hand in her husband’s and lay

strangely still and quiet.

"Bob has gone for the doctor," proceeded Mr. Pendell, nodding across at Mrs. Tippens.

In replying, Mrs. Tippens looked at the patient and then nodded back at him.

Before morning broke Mrs. Pendell had brought a child prematurely into the world. That she lived and the baby lived the doctor assured Mr. Pendell was owing entirely to Mrs. Tippens's extraordinary devotion and excellent nursing; and Mr. Pendell declared solemnly to Mrs. Tippens he would never forget her goodness—"night or day, she had only to say what she wanted, and he would be quite at her service"—a promise he found it convenient to forget when evil days fell upon Dick and his wife.

While these events and exchanges of amenities were passing, there happened a curious experience to Mrs. Tippens one night while she was off duty.

Her husband was out on "a late job," and had told her not to sit up for him; and Mrs. Tippens having undressed and said her prayers, and placed a box of matches where she could instantly lay hand upon it, was about to blow out the candle and step into bed when from the little room at the end of the passage there came a chorus of "*Mother! Mother! MOTHER!*" which caused her, without making any addition to her toilet beyond instinctively thrusting her bare feet into a pair of her husband's slippers, to snatch up the candle and rush to the place where her children slept.

"Now then, what is all this noise about?" she asked, seeing they were every one alive and each sitting bolt upright in bed. Theoretically Mrs. Tippens was nothing if not a disciplinarian, but the young ones twisted her round their little fingers for all that. "You'll bring all the lodgers down; I have a great mind to give each of you a good whipping."

"There was a woman in the room, mammal!" said Mrs. Tippens's second-born.

"And she came and touched me," added the youngest of the trio.

"Yes, that she did, I see her," exclaimed the eldest son; "a little woman with hair hanging about her like yours, only grey and not so long, and with eyes as black as Lucy's new doll's, the one Mr. Pendell gave her, and as dark as that man with the white turban we

saw in the Strand and—”

“Hold your tongue this instant, and never let me hear your nonsense again,” interrupted Mrs. Tippens angrily. “You had too much pudding for supper, that’s what’s the matter with you, and you got the nightmare and woke up thinking you saw all sorts of things.”

“But we couldn’t all have had nightmares,” persisted Dick, who was a sturdy lad, and his father’s pride and hope; “I saw her go up to Effie and lay her hand on her.”

“It was cold, too,” supplemented the child.

“And I saw her as well,” capped Lucy, fearful of lagging behind the others in this little matter of renown and glory.

“You are very naughty children,” answered Mrs. Tippens, in a superior sort of tone; then, descending to details, “it is so very likely, Dicky, you could see anyone in the dark.”

“Oh, but she brought a light with her, a sort of a lamp.”

At this point Mrs. Tippens collapsed. If old Mrs. Jones were able, not merely to go wandering about a house for which she paid no rent or taxes, but also to find her own light, what other feat might that lady not be expected to perform? “Now, never let me hear any more of such folly,” she said, however, valiantly, upon the principle that most noise is to be got out of an empty barrel; “I’ll turn the key in the door, and then you’ll know nobody can get in.”

“No, leave the key inside, and I’ll lock the door, and then, if she comes again, I’ll holloa.”

“You’d better not,” retorted his mother, so sharply that Dick, discomfited, wrapped the bedclothes about his head, and twisting himself up like a hedgehog, lay repeating in a sort of rhyme the description of the woman who had broken in upon his rest.

That Mrs. Tippens did not sleep much during the course of the night—no, not even when her husband was snoring by her side, and the children had long sunk into slumber—will be readily imagined.

Chapter Three

Few things had ever caused more excitement in a neighbourhood than the disappearance of Doctor and Mrs. Jones. Here to-day and

gone to-morrow; gone, without beat of drum or sound of fife; gone, without the excitement of furniture moving, or cab laden with luggage, or funeral pomp and ceremony; even a one-horse hearse, without plumes or mutes, or decorous wands, or long black cloaks, or hat-bands, or mourning coaches to follow, would have been better than this silent, mysterious flitting.

If the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed up husband and wife they could not have vanished more utterly. There was the house they had lived in, but where were they?

What secret did that one night hold which all the intelligence of the whole parish failed to elucidate. Where was he? What was more to the point, where was *she*? Upon this last question public opinion at length became unanimous. She was buried in the cellars. Her husband had murdered her—so it was finally decided—and after killing the “poor dear” had disposed of her remains in the manner indicated. That an industrious course of digging and grubbing brought no body or bones to light proved nothing but that “the doctor was a deep one,” to quote the observations of local wiseacres.

“He used her cruel in her lifetime,” said one.

“Ay, that he did,” capped another. “And he wouldn’t give her the chance of Christian burial. She’s lying hidden away in some dark corner; no wonder the creature can’t rest there. No; I wouldn’t sleep a night in that house, not if you counted me down a hundred pounds in golden sovereigns.”

“Neither would I, was it ever so.”

“For there’s not a doubt she walks.”

“Of course she does. Didn’t my own cousin, when she was coming along the passage one summer’s night, feel like an icy wind at the nape of her neck, and as if a cold hand was laid flat on her shoulders? And she always says she knows if she had looked round she’d have seen the old woman with her grey hair——”

“That he used to drag her about by——”

“Streaming down her back, and her eyes, filled with hunger and ill-treatment, staring through the darkness.”

“The house ought to be pulled to the ground—that’s what ought to be done with it——”

“And not one stone left on another——”

“And those cellars thoroughly examined.”

"It's my belief there's some secret place in them that hasn't been found out yet."

"Very likely. You know it is reported there used to be a passage big enough for a man to creep along from there to the Thames."

"Bless and save us—maybe he has put her in the river."

"No, no; though he was wicked enough for that or anything else, she's in the house somewhere right enough, and if she could speak she would say so."

"I wonder where he is?"

"Lord knows. Enjoying himself, most likely, beyond the seas."

"I suppose he was about the worst man you ever knew."

"I suppose he was about the worst man anybody ever knew."

"And the cleverest."

"Aye, he had brains to do anything, but they all turned to wickedness."

It often happens that a man obtains a reputation for talent in his own immediate circle on very slight and insufficient grounds; but in the case of Dr. Jones, popular rumour did not exaggerate the missing gentleman's abilities.

He was very clever indeed. He was so clever he might have risen to almost any height in his profession, had he not been at once lazy and self-indulgent. His father having lived and practiced before, he succeeded to a prosperous business and a wide connection. When he first started on his own account, all the old houses in the Street where he lived, and all the old houses in many other streets and squares and terraces and groves near at hand, were inhabited by well-to-do City people, by widows amply dowered, by men who had made their money in trade and were now living in affluent retirement.

It was a capital parish for a doctor to settle in; none of your new neighbourhoods, tenanted by mere birds of passage; once a medical man got a patient he had a chance of keeping him for many years. There were names on Dr. Jones's books of people and families who had been physicked by the Jones for more than half a century. Never a man began life under more auspicious circumstances.

He had the medical ball at his feet. Old ladies adored him, because he ordered them exactly what he knew they liked in the way of eating; old gentlemen were quite sure he understood their

complaints, when he declared "a few glasses of sound wine could hurt no one." He met the best physicians and surgeons in consultation, and people agreed if any man could put a person on his legs again that man was Dr. Jones.

But as time went on, and Dr. Jones waxed more prosperous and less careful, it was found that, in spite of his many admirable virtues, he had grave faults. In no single respect did his moral character attain to that high standard which a doctor, above all other men, ought to try to reach. Things were whispered about him which mothers felt could not bespoken of before the younger members of the family; things indeed, which were, even among matrons, mentioned with chairs drawn close together, and bated breath and much uplifting of eyes and hands.

Fact is, the decency and restraint of respectable English society had become intolerable to the successful practitioner. For a long time he contented himself with sowing his bad wild oats at a distance from his dwelling—drinking, gambling, and leading the loosest of lives in the many disreputable haunts to be found on the north side of the Thames, instead of frequenting those in his own county of Surrey. But by degrees he began to fall into evil habits near home; then into the midst of that very sanctuary presided over by a maiden sister of uncertain age and rigid morality, he introduced all manner of wickedness.

The day came when Miss Jones could endure the drinking and the smoking and the card-playing and the boon-companions no longer. With a certain stately dignity she packed up her belongings and left the house where she had been born. Further, she employed a lawyer to disentangle her pecuniary affairs from those of her brother. Then all their little world knew dreadful things must be going on at Dr. Jones's. His character, or rather lack of character, was discussed both by church and chapel goers. His doings added a fresh zest to parish visiting, for, of course, the poor knew even more about the doctor's sins than their betters. His tastes led him to prefer bold, flaunting women to their more modest, if not less frail, sisters; and the brazen impudence of the "dreadful creatures" he successively selected for housekeepers furnished as constant a theme for comment and gossip as the shortcomings of Doctor Jones himself.

"He wants a wife to steady him," said one lady, whose daughter

had been marriageable for nearly a third part of the time allotted by the Psalmist to man's sojourn on earth.

Alas! poor soul, her wishes blinded her. All the wives of all the patriarchs could not have steadied Dr. Jones. He had started on a muck, and was running it blindly, like one possessed. Had he lived in the former days, one might have said that not one devil merely but a legion had taken for habitation the handsome fleshly temple of his body.

In the way of open sin, unblushing audacious wickedness, no medical man, perhaps, ever vied with Dr. Jones.

His house, after his sister's departure, became a scandal and a reproach, and yet so great was the doctor's skill he still had patients, and good paying patients too, but they were all of his own sex; the man did not live who could have sent for him to attend wife, or sister, or mother, or daughter.

So his family practice slipped into other and cleaner hands, and another and wiser general practitioner grew rich upon Doctor Jones's leavings.

All at once society was amazed by the rumour that the Doctor was going to be married to a lady possessed of great wealth; so report said, adding that ere long wonderful changes might be looked upon in the old house.

It was swept and garnished at any rate, the drawing-room smartened up, a brougham purchased, the latest and most utterly objectionable housekeeper dispatched about her business, whatever it might be, two respectable servants engaged, a man hired to look after the horse, answer the door, and prove a general credit to the street. Doctor Jones himself left off smoking pipes and took to cigars instead; he eschewed the local public houses, foreswore billiards, all packs of cards were cleared out of the dwelling; he washed, he shaved; he wore a coat instead of a dressing-gown, and he was to be found, by such patients as desired to see him, before twelve o'clock, till which time he had of late been in the habit of taking his rest in bed.

Things were looking up; the Mrs. Jones who was to be had, people felt, already achieved wonders; she was a credit to her sex; ladies admitted they could not possibly ever have the husband again as a medical man, but they might once more receive him as an acquaintance. Prodigals are always interesting, perhaps because

no one ever really believes they will reform, and Doctor Jones was a specially delightful prodigal—so clever, so handsome, so reckless, so wicked, so extravagant.

He had studied at one time at a German University, and it had somehow been ascertained that no wilder spirit ever troubled the peace of the quaint old town that lay under the shadow of the frowning castle.

His world which, a short time previously, failed to find words strong enough to express its reprobation of his conduct, now began to make excuses for him. Perhaps his faults had been exaggerated, possibly there was only a modicum of truth in the reports which had been spread abroad concerning his doings: clever men always make enemies, the tattle of the lower orders could not be exactly depended upon; and in fine, to put the matter in a nutshell, it was at length unanimously decided to call on Mrs. Jones when she returned from the honeymoon.

There was something after these visits for gossips to talk about! What countrywoman could she be?—where had he met her?—what was she?—who was she?—what had she been?

Years seemed to stretch between her and the doctor—on the wrong side, of course.

She was little, she was old, she was plain, she was ignorant, and she was most furiously jealous. She could not endure her husband to look at or speak to any other woman. Even the elderly unmarried daughter of her mother, who was a widow, who would have liked Seraphina to undertake the doctor's case, even this innocent ewe lamb seemed unbearable to the bride.

No use now to think of pleasant little parties to which Mrs. Jones and her reformed husband might be bidden. No card-tables, no carpet-dances, no snug dinners, no safe and harmless social intercourse, which it had been hoped might prove to the repentant doctor as refreshing and non-intoxicating as a course of milk, lemonade, and cocoa to the once infuriated drunkard.

On the whole, perhaps, the matrons, in their hearts, thought Mrs. Jones's virtues worse than her husband's vices; tacitly it was agreed not to force acquaintanceship on her. Possibly she had her own set of friends, and it was felt it would be most undesirable to introduce foreigners of no respectable colour into the bosom of British families who had made their money in the City, as

everybody knew; and who piqued themselves upon the strictness of their morals, the length of their purses, and the strength of their prejudices.

One gentleman, whose own face was as rosy as a peony, declared, with a mild asseveration, "Jones has married a blackamoor;" but Mrs. Jones was not black, only exceedingly brown, so brown that if she darkened much more, as time went on, she bade fair eventually to outvie the rich splendour of the old Spanish mahogany chairs, which had been recovered and repolished to do her honour.

Chapter Four

At the end of little more than three years from the date of his marriage, it might have been truly said of Doctor Jones that his last state was worse than his first. How many demons eventually took up their habitation within him it would be impossible to say; but the doings of the Jones's household, more particularly the doings of its master, became a terror and reproach to the neighbourhood.

How the case really stood no one ever exactly knew; all sorts of rumours and stories passed from mouth to mouth. She would not give him a shilling of her money, so gossip averred. He had stood over her with a cutting whip to compel her to sign papers, and then she would not; a mode of proceeding on the part of Doctor Jones to practise before witnesses, which was, to say the least of the matter, unlikely. Popular report asserted he starved her; but as she generally answered the street-door herself, was free to walk in and out if she pleased, and could have told any tradesmen to bring her anything she fancied, this was evidently a libel. At one time an idea got abroad that the whole tale of her fortune had been a myth; that the Doctor had been taken in, and that there were dreadful quarrels between them in consequence; but the boastings of various servants who declared they had seen her with "rolls on rolls" of banknotes and with such diamonds and rubies as the "Queen of Sheba or Solomon himself could have had nothing more splendid," negatived the truth of this statement.

Money or no money, however, the Jones, were a miserable couple. Mrs. Jones could not and would not endure a female

servant about the house; as fast as they were engaged they went: a fortnight was a long time for any woman, young or old, to stop in the situation, and so ere long the house acquired that look of dirt and neglect some houses seem especially able to assume at the shortest notice. Little more than three years married and already the grass growing between the stones in the stableyard was nearly a foot high. The high-stepping horse had long been sold, and the brougham also; the new piano, never opened, followed suit; and about the same time Doctor Jones, giving up all idea of reformation and practice, and abandoning the role of a repentant prodigal, returned to his swine and his husks on the Middlesex side of the river; for he could not enjoy even such companionship and diet on his own side of the water, for fear Mrs. Jones might take it in her head to mar with her presence the delights of an evening in some low public house or lower music hall, or lower depth still; for, if all stories were to be believed, the Doctor went down very low indeed. Accordingly, when Christmas, for the fourth time after that inauspicious and, as some people went so far as to say, unchristian marriage, was approaching, people felt Doctor Jones had run about the length of his tether.

A change of some sort seemed imminent. He was in debt in the neighbourhood, a thing he had never been known to be in before. Even the few things sent into that evil house were not paid for, and hitherto the Doctor's credit had been so good that he owed in the neighbourhood more than might otherwise have been the case.

Mrs. Jones said she would not pay, and the Doctor said he could not. Nevertheless, after some parley, he promised to do what he could after Christmas—this was remembered afterwards—and the British tradesman, easily irritated, easily appeased, departed.

No joint, no turkey, no anything was ordered in for the 25th of that December. "Let him get his Christmas dinner where he gets his other dinners," said Mrs. Jones, in answer to a feeble remonstrance from the crone who came in daily to "put the place a bit to rights," a woman so old, so wrinkled, so ugly, so dirty, and so shabby that even Doctor Jones, his wife felt, was unlikely to chuck her under the chin, or exchange with her repartees more remarkable for wit than refinement. Apprised in due time of the fare he might expect at home, the once again unreformed prodigal

announced his intention of accepting an invitation he said he had received to dine at a friend's house on Christmas Day.

Mrs. Jones tried hard to ascertain where this friend lived, but in vain, and still firm to her intention of providing no feast, even for herself, she told Mrs. Jubb, the charwoman, to bring in the tea tray and the kettle, and then to go.

About the events of that day and evening and the following morning Mrs. Jubb had afterwards much to tell, and she told it.

"As I come up from the kitchen," she was wont to observe, "and an awful kitchen that was too, full of black-beetles and slugs—just as I got on the top of the stairs, I saw the master, with his thick coat on, brushing his hat. He put it on and he took his umbrella, and he opened the door and slammed it after him, and that was the last I ever see of Doctor Jones. I took the tea-things into the drawing-room, and set the kettle on the hob, and I asked Mrs. Jones if she was sure I could not do anything else before I went."

"She said, 'Quite sure, Mrs. Jubb; good evening.'

"I had a sort of feeling on me, I did not like to leave her, though I knew John's children would be crying for me at home; and so I made believe to be putting the cup and saucer and plate nearer to her hand, and she looked round in her quick way, and asked sharp, as if I had angered her:

"'Didn't you hear me say "good evening," Mrs. Jubb? You can go.'

"So I went, and that was the last I ever saw of her. Goodness only knows where they both went to. It was not the next day, but the next day but one, the police got into the house through a window at the back that was left half an inch open (for I went down to the station, and told the inspector I was sure as sure murder had been done, for I could not make anybody hear, and the gas was burning, and the cat, poor thing, mewing in the area, and not another sign of life about the place); and there they found the tray just as I'd left it, and the fire out and the kettle on the hob, and high or low, in garret or cellar, not a trace of Doctor or Mrs. Jones."

There was nothing which gratified Mrs. Jubb's numerous friends and acquaintances more than to get her started on this theme.

The story was one which, properly managed, lasted for hours. Mrs. Jubb's feelings, Mrs. Jubb's doings, Mrs. Jubb's sayings, the remarks of the police, the fury and dismay of the tradespeople, and the many observations of the sprightly youth and beauty and strength of the neighbourhood, enabled the narrative to be spun out almost to the length of a three-volume novel.

"And after all, *where* did Doctor and Mrs. Jones go?" once asked an impatient and inquisitive auditor, who chanced to be listening for the first time to the oft-told tale.

"That'll never be known on this earth," answered Mrs. Jubb; "my own notion is, she started to follow him—"

"Then she can't be buried in the cellars," interposed another.

"You don't know what a man like that could do," said Mrs. Jubb; "why, even now, poor as I am, I wouldn't live in the house as them Tippenses are doing, no, not if you paved the hall with golden guineas."

"There's nobody going to tempt you, mother," remarked an incredulous youth; "I'd chance meeting all the ghosts out of the churchyard, let alone old Mrs. Jones, for a ten-pound note."

"You don't know what you are talking about, Jim," retorted Mrs. Jubb.

"Well, it was a queer start anyway," returned the undaunted Jim; "the Kilkenny cats left their tails behind them, but the Doctor and his wife took away every bit of their bodies and left clothes, and furniture, and bedding, and china, and plate, and linen, and all, just as if they had walked out of the house to spend a day at a friend's."

Which statement was, indeed, literally true; when the police entered the house they found no corpse, no confusion, no symptom of murder or premeditated departure. Nothing seemed to have been removed except the master and mistress, who had not taken with them even the typical "comb and toothbrush."

They were gone. Doctor Jones's creditors drew their own conclusions; the wealthy and respectable inhabitants did not know what to believe or think; the police felt disposed to consider the whole affair a make-up between the doctor and his wife; the general public, as usual, were not to be convinced by argument, or confounded by facts, they preferred to believe old Mrs. Jones had been murdered and her body what they called "put away" somewhere about the premises. Shortly after there followed a

rumour of hidden treasure, then it was known for certain that the house was haunted, and, further, that no one who tried to live in it but was visited by some misfortune.

When the wind howled outside her dwelling, and shook the casements, and whistled through the keyholes, and the rain beat against the windows with a noise like slapping with an open hand, it was a dear delight to gossips to gather round Mrs. Jubb's fire, to which most who came contributed a billet and hear the whole story again, with additions of what had happened to those venturesome enough to try conclusions with old Mrs. Jones, out of the flesh.

"She was an awful woman to have much to say to when living," said Mrs. Jubb; "dead, she'll be a thousand times worse."

"I wonder what she wants wandering about the old house," said the irrepressible Jim; "if all accounts are true, she was none so happy in it."

"Ah, she knows that best herself, and she's not going to tell," returned Mrs. Jubb. "I wouldn't like to see her, that's all."

Chapter Five

To say that Mrs. Tippens wished to leave the house when her lodgers and children began to see visions is but to say she was a woman. She told her husband she "didn't know how she felt," which meant, as he was too well aware, that she desired to move. She likewise casually mentioned that "she seemed all nerves," and that "she was getting afraid of her own shadow."

To this Mr. Tippens replied he was very sorry, but he hoped she would try and pull herself together a bit, and not be frightened by a lot of lying stories. If they only held their tongues and stayed in the house for a while, people would soon quit talking about old Mrs. Jones, and then their lodgers would remain and not give notice because a door creaked.

He reminded her how he was answerable for the rent for three years, that he was not likely ever to get such cheap and convenient premises again, and he implored her, like a good girl, not to be foolish and believe the house was haunted just because a parcel of

old women, with Mrs. Jubb at their head, chose to give it a bad name.

"But, Dick," remonstrated Mrs. Tippens, "you know it is said that nobody thrives who stops here. There was old Mrs. Smith broke her leg in two places, and Mrs. Curtiss's child was run over in the street; and Mr. Perks, that was so respected, fell to robbing his employer, and is in jail now for taking more than a hundred pounds. And John Coombe turned teetotaller, and took to beating his wife—and—"

Mr. Tippens laughed outright. "Make your mind easy, Luce," he said; "I'm not likely either to turn teetotaller or take to beating you, lass; and as for the children, if you don't like them sleeping out of your sight, bring them in here till you get some of those notions blown off your mind; and when the days draw out a little, you and they shall have a week at the seaside, and you'll get so strong and well you'll laugh at ghosts, and make quite a joke of old Mrs. Jones."

Poor Mrs. Tippens! She only wished her lodgers could see the joke as well, for they were always going; except one old lady on the top floor who was blind and slightly deaf, not a soul stopped any time with her.

"I don't know how it is," she said to them, "for I have never seen anything in the house myself." Whereupon she was told "she was fortunate," or reminded "there were none so blind as those that would not see," or assured "her turn was certain to come," or advised, "clear out of the house before harm befell her and hers," "for it is just a-tempting of Providence to stop in it," said one person.

"Upon the other hand," as Mr. Tippens, determined to look on the bright side of things, remarked, "if lodgers were always going they were always coming; and you get such long prices for the rooms, Lucy, they can afford to stay empty part of a week now and then; and see how well the children are, having the yard to play in, which gives them plenty of air and keeps them out of the streets; and you are stronger and better yourself, and would be hearty if you would only stir about a bit more and not sit so constant at your needle." Further, business with Mr. Tippens was so good he had been forced to buy another horse, for which he paid seven pounds. "That very same horse," he often afterwards stated, "no

more nor a month later I sold, as true as I am standing her, for twenty guineas. A fare took a fancy to him and bid me the money, and you may be sure I didn't say 'no.'"

It was, perhaps, on the strength of this transaction Mrs. Tippens and family travelled to Southend for the week previously mentioned to eat shrimps and repair dilapidations, returning to Doctor Jones's former residence, as Mr. Tippens declared, "in the best of health and spirits."

It was not long, however, after their return before Mrs. Tippens again began to feel her nerves troubling her. She did not say anything to her husband about the matter, but she mentioned to a few friends she had a "sort of weight on her," as if there was "something wrong, she did not know what," and "a fluttering round her" and "a weakness in her limbs," and "a creeping sensation at the back of her neck, when she came along the passage, as though, on the warmest day, a chill, clammy hand was laid there," after which lucid description of symptoms the whole question of old Mrs. Jones was again thoroughly gone into; the statements of all the lodgers repeated *in extenso*, and the gossip current in the neighbourhood retailed for the twentieth time.

Small marvel that when, after these conversations, almost exhaustive as they were of the Jones topic, Mrs. Tippens, returning to her house, felt a "waft of raw air" meet her the moment she opened the street door, and something "brush along the hall after her," as she passed into the sitting-room. She was braver than most women, and would, had she seen anything tangible, have tried to solve the enigma. But this pursuit by a shadow, this terror of the unseen, the feeling that there was a presence in the room with her which yet eluded her sight, began to prey on both her mind and body. She longed to cry out, "Take me away from this evil house or I shall die"; but when Dick entered, his honest face radiant with smiles, his tongue ready to tell of the gentlemen who had hired him to drive them to Chiswick, and given him about four times his proper fare, and some present in his hands for "Luce, old girl," the words died away on her lips, and she could only thank Dick for thinking so constantly about her, and hang round his neck with a fervour Mr. Tippens was not accustomed to from a somewhat undemonstrative wife.

"Who do you think I have had a letter from?" he asked one

morning in the early summer, as he came in to breakfast, after a stroll down the street in search of a dried haddock or something savoury for Luce, who “seemed a bit peaked and off her feed”—Luce cannot speak of those days, and of her husband’s constant thought for her, now without tears—“why, from my cousin, Anne Jane; I met the postman—and Luce, I couldn’t get anything worth buying for you, only a nasty kipper, but I thought kippers were better than nothing, as you’re tired of rashers; well, as I was saying, I met the postman, and he gave me a letter from Anne Jane. Her mistress and the whole family are going abroad, but they are keeping on Anne Jane, you see, though she doesn’t go with them. While they are away she has a fancy for a change. She’s tired of the sea and Brighton, and thinks she’d like to spend her holiday in London, so she writes to ask if we can take her in; she wants to pay for her board and lodging, but, of course, that’s all nonsense; I shouldn’t let my uncle’s daughter pay a halfpenny for bread as long as I had a penny roll; what do you say, Luce? Shall I tell her to come; she’s a good girl, as you know, and a quiet, and she’d be company for you while I am away. What d’ye say, girl?”

“I’d be only too glad for her to come, Dick; but where is she to sleep; we could only give her the room at the end of the passage, and — ”

“If that’s all, make your mind quite easy; she doesn’t come of a family which trouble themselves about what you can’t lay hold of. Then you’re agreeable to have her, my girl; if you’re not, just say the word—”

“I can’t tell you how pleased I should be to have her, only—”

“I’ll make that all right, old woman,” and accordingly that very same day Dick went out and bought three sheets of notepaper for a penny, and three envelopes for the same price; and in the silent seclusion of the stable, while the horse-keeper was away for his dinner, invited an epistle to his cousin, in which he assured her of a warm welcome, of his determination not to take a farthing of her hard-earned wages, and of Lucy’s delight at the prospect of showing her the London sights. “My wife’s the best wife ever lived,” he finished, “but she’s a bit down at present, and I know you’ll cheer her up.

“So no more at present, from your loving cousin,

“R. TIPPENS.

“P.S. I hope you’re not afraid of ghosts, for folks will have it this house is haunted, though neither Luce or myself have ever seen anything worse nor ourselves.”

All in good time Miss Anne Jane Tippens arrived at the house tenanted by her cousins from London Bridge Station in a four-wheeler, on the top of which appeared a trunk, encased in a neat holland cover, bound with red, the handiwork Of Anne Jane, who paid the cabman his exact fare duly ascertained beforehand, and walked in the hall old Mrs. Jones was supposed to haunt, laden with all the impedimenta perishable creatures of the frailer sex are so fond of carrying whithersoever they go—a withered nosegay, a basket filled with seaweed and shells, a bandbox, another paper-box, oblong, and a few paper parcels were amongst the baggage; but at length everything was stowed away in the room Doctor Jones had used as a surgery, and Mrs. Tippens stood surveying the “very genteel figure” of her husband’s cousin, as that young person, after refreshing laying of her dusty face, stood before the glass, “doing up” her hair.

Miss Tippens was the incarnation of the ideal sewing-maid in a good family.

Tall, but not too tall; thin, but not too thin; with pallid face, brown eyes, thick hair brushed back, and tightly plaited till it looked of no account, not pretty or ugly, quiet of movement, soft of voice; a good girl who—at last her toilet finished—turned to Mrs. Tippens and said: “Now, dear, you’ll let me help you all I can while I stay here.”

Chapter Six

“I never told her one single word about old Mrs. Jones; there seemed a spell on me,” said Mrs. Tippens, using the approved formula of her class, when speaking, subsequently, concerning the events which rendered Miss Tippens’s visit memorable. “That very first day as ever was she said, with that still sort of laugh of hers, Dick had warned her not to come if she felt anyways shy of ghosts. ‘I have always had rather a wish to see a ghost,’ she went on,

making my very blood run cold with the light way she talked, and maybe old Mrs. Jones listening to her for aught I could tell. 'What sort of a ghost is it you keep here, Lucy?'

"'There has been a lot of chatter about the house,' I made answer, 'but I don't say anything on the subject indoors for fear of the children being frightened. People pretend there is something not right in the place, but nothing has come Dick's way or mine either'; and then I began talking of something else and Anne took the hint; she was a wonderfully wise, prudent sort of girl, as girls have to be who get into high families and want to keep their situations."

The day following Miss 'Tippens' arrival was devoted to showing her some of the London sights. She had been in London before, but only for a short time when "the family" came up to town, and she being kept hard at work under the eye of an exceedingly strict housekeeper was unable to see any of the wonders of the metropolis, except Kensal Green Cemetery, concerning which cheerful place she spoke with a good deal of enthusiasm. As a foretaste of the delights to come, Mrs. Tippens took her to the Abbey, showed her the exterior of the Houses of Parliament, the National Gallery, Northumberland House, the fountains in Trafalgar Square, Covent Garden, Somerset House, Temple Bar, St. Paul's, and the Monument. By the time they had arrived at Fish Street Hill, Anne Jane was tired out, and declining to climb Pope's "tall bully," asked Mrs. Tippens if they were very far from home, "because," she added, "I don't think I can walk much more."

"Dear me!" cried Mrs. Tippens, "I ought to have remembered you were not over strong; why, you look fit to drop. We'll go down to the pier and take the boat straight back, and you can rest all day to-morrow, for I shan't be able to stir out, as our first-floors are leaving, and I must see about getting the rooms fit for anyone to see."

"You'll sleep without rocking to-night, young woman," observed Mr. Tippens, as they all sat together over an early supper.

"I always sleep wonderfully sound," replied Miss Tippens, stating the fact as if some peculiar merit attached to it.

"And you'd better lie in in the morning, and I'll bring you a cup of tea," said Mrs. Tippens, kindly hospitable.

"Ay, make her stop a-bed," exclaimed Mr. Tippens. "I'll be bound she gets none too much sleep in service. I'd like well to see a bit of colour in your cheeks before you leave us."

Next morning Mrs. Tippens took a tray, on which was set out a nice little breakfast, into her visitor's bedchamber. Anne Jane did not look much the better for her night's rest and morning's sleep.

"I woke at five," she said, "and then went off again, and never roused till you came in, and yet I feel as tired as possible. I am not much accustomed to walking, and we did walk a long way yesterday."

"Yes, we went too far," agreed Mrs. Tippens, and then she sat down beside her guest's pillow, and tucked the sheet under the tray to keep it steady, and hoped she would relish her breakfast, which, Anne declared "she was sure to do, if only because they were so kind to her."

"We would like to be kind to you," said Mrs. Tippens; adding, so that no more might be said on the subject, "and you slept well?"

"Yes; but isn't it funny, all the earlier part of the night I was dreaming about a woman being murdered. It was talking about old times, and wandering about those ancient places and tombs and monuments, I suppose, made me think of such things. I was quite glad to see the sun shining in at the window when I woke, for oh, the dream did appear just like reality!" And the dreamer paused to drink a little tea, and take a bit of bread and butter, and munch a few leaves of water cress, and taste the delicate slices of ham Dick himself had cut, what he called "Vauxhall fashion," to tempt her cousin's poor appetite, while Mrs. Tippens sat silent, afraid, she could not tell why, of what might be coming.

"Dreams are strange things," proceeded Miss Tippens, after the fashion of a person originating an entirely novel idea, "and mine was a strange dream."

"Your tea will be stone cold, dear," interposed Mrs. Tippens. It was but deferring the evil hour, she felt, yet every moment of delay seemed a moment gained.

"I don't like it very warm," answered the other, "and I want to tell you my dream. I thought I was in a room I had never seen before, with three windows to the street, and one long, narrow window that looked out I didn't know on what. The room was wainscotted about two yards from the floor, well furnished with

chairs and tables; I could feel a thick carpet under my feet, and see a glass over the chimney-piece, in which a woman was looking at herself. Oh! Luce, she was the strangest woman I ever beheld, so little, she was forced to stand on a footstool to see herself in the glass; she had a brown face and grey hair, and her dress was unfastened, and a necklace, that sparkled and glittered, clasped her neck, and she pinned a brooch, that shone like fire, in the front of her under bodice; and on a little table beside her lay an open jewel case, in which there were precious stones gleaming like green and yellow stars."

"Do eat your breakfast, Anne, and never mind the dream; you can tell it to me afterwards."

"There isn't much more to tell," answered Anne. "All at once she saw in the glass the door open, and a man come in. With a stifled scream she jumped down from the stool, seized the case, and tried to close her dress up round her throat, and hide the necklace; but he was too quick for her. He said something, I could not hear what; and then, as she cowered down, he caught her and wrenched the case out of her hand, and made a snatch at the necklace just as she flew upon him, with all her fingers bent and uttering the most terrible cries that ever came out of a woman's lips—I think I hear them now; then, in a minute she fell back, and I could see she was only kept from dropping on the floor by the tight grip he had on the necklace. I seemed to know she was being choked, and I tried to call out, but I could not utter a sound. I strove to rush at the man, but my feet felt rooted where I stood; then there came a great darkness like the darkness of a winter's night."

"Let me get you another cup of tea, dear," said Mrs. Tippens, in a voice which shook a little in spite of all her efforts to steady it; "you've let this stand so long it is not fit to drink."

"It is just as I like my tea, thank you," answered Miss Tippens, cheerfully, as she devoted herself to the good things provided.

"What do you think of my dream?"

"That I shouldn't have liked to dream it," replied Mrs. Tippens. "Do let me pour you out some more tea, and then I must run away, for the first-floor lodgers will be wanting me." Which was a feint on the part of Mrs. Tippens, who felt she could not bear to hear anything more at the moment about the little woman with the

brown face and the grey hair, whose portrait she recognised too surely as that of old Mrs. Jones.

"Though why she can't let us, who never did her any harm, alone, I can't imagine," considered Mrs. Tippens. "This is a dreadful house — true enough, there has been murder done in it, and the blood is crying aloud for vengeance. I wonder where that wicked wretch put her. Oh! Mrs Jones, if you'd only tell us where your poor bones are mouldering, I am sure Dick would have them decently buried, let the cost be what it might."

The first-floor lodgers were gone, and the rooms scrubbed out before Anne Jane, having dressed and settled up her own bedchamber, made her appearance in her cousin's parlour; but when she suggested that they might go upstairs and have a look at the apartments just vacated, Mrs. Tippens made the excuse that they were not exactly in order.

"The charwoman is up there still," she exclaimed; "she's making half-a-day."

"What a wonderfully nice house for Dick to have got," continued Miss Tippens.

"Yes," answered Dick's wife faintly. There was nothing to be objected to in the size of the house, if only Mrs. Jones could have been kept out of it!

"If you don't mind my leaving you, Anne, for half an hour, I think I'll just run out and get a few things we want," she said. "Supposing anyone should come after the first-floor, Mrs. Burdock can show it." Which would have been all very well, had not Mrs. Burdock, ten minutes after Mrs. Tippens's departure, put her head into the parlour to say that she should like to go home to see to her children's dinners, and, if it made no difference, she would come back in the afternoon and wipe over the windows and black-lead the grates. "The rooms are quite clean and sweet," she added, "if anybody by chance do come to look at them."

The children were out in the yard playing, the meat was cooking beautifully in the oven, the fruit pudding was boiling gently on the trivet, the potatoes were in the saucepan, ready to be put on the fire at a certain time which Mrs. Tippens had indicated; the street was simmering in the noontide heat of a summer's day, and Anne Jane, making a frock for the baby asleep in its cradle, was thinking Lucy's lines had fallen into very pleasant places, when there came

at the front door a knock, which she instinctively understood meant lodgers.

They were two young gentlemen, attracted by the neat appearance of the house, by the snowy curtains in Mrs. Tippens's room, the bird-cage hanging in the window, the flowers in bloom, ranged in pots on the sill.

"Could we see the rooms you have to let?" asked the elder, who acted as spokesman.

"Certainly, sir; will you be pleased to walk in?" answered Anne Jane in her best manner; and motioning to the strangers to precede her, she followed them up to the first floor, where she flung wide the door of the principal apartment.

"By Jove!" exclaimed both men, almost simultaneously, "who'd have thought there was such a jolly room in this old house?" and they walked over to one of the windows and looked out into the street, and then turned towards the fireplace, and then——

"Hello! What's the matter?" cried the first speaker, hurrying towards the door, against the lintel of which Mr. Tippens' cousin was leaning, looking more like a corpse than a living woman. "Here, hand over that chair, Hal, I believe she is going to faint."

"No," she gasped; "no—no—I—shall be better—directly."

At that moment Mrs. Tippens, who had heard from a neighbour some gentlemen were gone to look at her rooms, put her key in the lock and came hurrying upstairs. The first glance told her what had happened.

"My cousin is not very strong, sir," she said, in a voice she tried to keep steady, though she was trembling in every limb. "I'll just take her into the parlour, and be with you in a moment, if you please."

"Let me help you," entreated the younger man. "Take my arm, do.—Is she subject to attacks of this sort?" he went on, speaking in a lower tone.

"Not that I know of," was the reply. "Perhaps, sir," suggested Mrs. Tippens, "you would not mind looking over the rooms by yourselves. There is no one in but the children; I scarcely like leaving my cousin alone."

"Is there anything you want—anything I can run out and get for you?" asked the young fellow pleasantly. "Do you think that a little brandy——"

"I have some in the house, thank you, sir," answered Mrs. Tippens; and so at last she got rid of him, and stood looking at Anne Jane, who, leaning back in Mr. Tippens' own particular armchair, looked up at her and murmured, "The room."

"Yes, dear."

"It was the room of my dream."

"I thought as much."

"Did he kill her there?"

"Who's to tell? Nobody knows whether she is alive or dead, for that matter."

Chapter Seven

"No, sir, I won't deceive you. If you are wanting rooms, as you say, for a permanency, and think of buying good furniture that would get knocked about and ruined in moving, and settling down comfortably in the next lodgings you take, you had better not come here."

"Why, are you going to leave the house?"

"My husband is answerable for the rent for nearly two years longer," replied Mrs. Tippens evasively. "No, sir, it is not that; I wish it was."

"Have you any infectious illness in the place?"

"I'd rather have smallpox," broke out Mrs. Tippens, who felt she could endure her trouble no longer in silence. "We might get rid of that, but we can't get rid of old Mrs. Jones."

"Who is she—a lodger?"

"Worse than the worst of lodgers, sir; a lodger can do no more than owe rent, or at the most take things that don't belong to him; but Mrs. Jones pays no rent, and wants to live in every room in the house, and as fast as new lodgers come and we think we are going to be a bit comfortable at last, drives them to give notice. Fever and ague would be small evils in comparison to old Mrs. Jones, and why she torments us so I can't imagine, we never did the woman any injury; and as for her money I am sure if it was lying in bags of gold and silver at my feet I wouldn't touch a coin of it."

The two men stared at each other in amazement, then the elder

said solemnly:

"In Heaven's name, *who* is Mrs. Jones?"

"She was the wife of a Doctor Jones, sir. He once rented this house. He and she disappeared the same night, and have never been heard of since."

"But I thought you said she lived here?"

"No, sir; I don't know where she lives, if she is living at all; but this is the way of it, one set of lodgers after another say they are very sorry but they can't stop on account of old Mrs. Jones. They either meet her on the stairs, or she takes a chair at the table when they are having their dinner, or she goes into their bedroom with a light in her hand, and then my cousin must get dreaming about her and, as you saw, was taken bad the moment she crossed the threshold of this room. I am sure, sir, I never did believe in ghosts and suchlike before we came here, but I can't disbelieve now, after what I've heard; and so I tell you not to take the apartments or to go to any expense buying furniture, for you wouldn't stop—I know you wouldn't—a fortnight is the longest anybody ever stays now."

"That settles the matter, we'll come, and we'll stay longer. For my own part I have always rather wanted to see a ghost and—"

"Oh, don't talk that way, please, sir."

"Well, at any rate, we'll pay you for the rooms for a month certain, and if you can do our cooking and make us a little comfortable, we won't quarrel about terms."

"But I don't think you exactly understand, sir."

"Yes I do, and I trust we shall know more about old Mrs. Jones than we do now before we are much older."

"I hope you won't buy good furniture, sir, till you have been here a few days; I can spare enough just to make the place tidy for you to come into." And so it was settled; the young men, after saying they would like to take possession the same evening, put a month's rent and money to provide grocery and so forth into Mrs. Tippens's reluctant hand, and departed.

"Let what will happen, they can't say I did not warn them," thought Mrs. Tippens, as she hurried off to see whether Anne Jane had been able to attend to the potatoes or if they were boiled to pulp.

Meantime the friends, walking along the street together,

remarked, "What a strange-looking girl that young woman who so nearly fainted."

"Yes, cataleptic I shouldn't wonder; did you notice what a faraway, unseeing sort of expression there was in her eyes?"

"I did; and what a thick white complexion, if I may use the term."

"That is a queer notion about old Mrs. Jones; we must get Mrs. Tippens up to make tea for us some night and hear all the rights of the story."

"And I'll take the liberty of putting fresh locks on the doors."

"You think it is somebody playing tricks, then?"

"Of course; what else can it be. You don't believe in disembodied spirits taking up their abode in brick and mortar houses, I suppose?"

It was a strange thing, as Mrs. Tippens often subsequently remarked, that from the time the new lodgers, who were medical students, took possession of the first-floor, people seemed able to stay in the other parts of the house. Where old Mrs. Jones had gone, and what old Mrs. Jones was doing, could only, Mrs. Tippens felt, be matter for conjecture; one comfort, she ceased to roam about the rooms and wander up and down the staircase; there were even times when Mrs. Tippens, passing through the hall, forgot to remember that sudden waft of cold air and the chilly hand laid on the back of her neck; she still—force of habit, perhaps—instinctively refrained from looking round, lest she should encounter the streaming grey hair and dark face and fierce black eyes of old Mrs. Jones; but at the end of a fortnight she began to feel, as she expressed the matter, "quite comfortable and easy in her mind."

She had said something of this sort one evening to her cousin, and was waiting vainly for a reply, when Miss Tippens, without the slightest apparent reason, burst into a despairing fit of tears.

"What, crying? For the Lord's sake, girl, tell me what you are crying for," exclaimed Mrs. Tippens. "Do, Anne, dear, if you are in any trouble, only trust it to me, and I'll help you all I can, and so will Dick. Who has vexed you?"

"*It's—old—Mrs.—Jones,*" sobbed Anne Jane. "I have tried hard for your sake, but I can't bear her any longer; I must go away—I must—I shall be a raving maniac if I stop in this house much

longer. Why has she fastened on me?" asked Miss Tippens, looking at her relation with streaming eyes. "Oh, Lucy, why has she left everyone else in the house to give me no peace of my life—I can't sleep for dreaming of her—she is at my bedside every night wanting me to do something for her, or go to some place with her; and then the whole day long I keep trying to remember what she said and what she wanted, and I can't; no, Lucy, for no advantage to you, or any other human being, can I face the horror of her any longer."

At Anne Jane's first words Mrs. Tippens's work dropped from her hands on to the floor, and during the delivery of this address she remained gazing at the speaker with a sort of fascinated terror; then she cried out:

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! and just when I thought we were all settling down so comfortably; what an awful old woman! But do you ever see her, Anne, except when you are asleep?"

"No, but I feel her round and about me. There's a chilliness blows on my neck, and a coldness creeps down my spine, and I seem always to know that there's somebody beside or behind me; it's dreadful—if it was to go on, I'd rather be dead and out of my misery at once."

"Suppose I made you up a bed somewhere else," suggested Mrs. Tippens.

"What would be the good? She's in every room in the house; she's up and down the stairs, and on the roof, and along the parapet, and—"

"Don't talk about her any more, you'll frighten me," exclaimed Mrs. Tippens.

"And haven't I been frightened? How would you like to lie in the dark and know a woman—"

"Mrs. Tippens," called a voice, which made both women jump.

"Lor!" exclaimed Mrs. Tippens, recovering herself, "you needn't be frightened, Anne, it's only Mr. Maldon—(yes, sir, I'm coming)—I remember he left word with little Lucy he wanted to see me before he went out this morning, and what with one thing and another I quite forgot it."

Having tendered which explanation, Mrs. Tippens hurried to the first floor, leaving Anne Jane sitting with her hands tightly folded and her great eyes fixed on vacancy, or—old Mrs. Jones.

"Close the door, if you please, Mrs. Tippens," said Mr. Maldon, the elder of her two new lodgers, as, after her apologies for her forgetfulness, the nominal mistress of Dr. Jones's former residence stood waiting to hear what was wanted. "For some days past I have wished to speak to you alone. I only think it right to say—"

"Oh, sir, don't, for mercy's sake, say you've seen old Mrs. Jones too."

There was such an agony of entreaty in Mrs. Tippens's voice, the young man, who did not believe in ghosts, and had expressed a wish to see one, might well have been excused smiling, but he did not smile, he only answered:

"No, but I have seen something else."

"What, sir?"

"Your cousin wandering about the house in her sleep."

"In her sleep! When, Mr. Maldon?"

"Well, to go no further back, last night. I followed her up to the top of the house, and she was actually going out on the roof, when I gently took her by the arm and walked her down to her own room again. I am afraid she may do herself a mischief. I was careful not to wake her, but if she should be frightened, and wake suddenly, no one can tell what accident might happen. From the first I thought there was something strange in her appearance, but I should not have imagined she was a sleep-walker."

"And what should you advise me to do, sir?" asked Mrs. Tippens earnestly, for this seemed to her a dreadful thing. For a respectable young woman—and she believed and felt certain Anne Jane to be as respectable a young woman as ever lived, a wise, prudent, sensible, virtuous girl—to go wandering in the middle of the night about a house in which there were lodgers, and be handed down the stairs and back to her own room by any man, young or old, was a matter which appeared in Mrs. Tippens's eyes so preposterous, so dreadful, she could scarcely realise it; she had not courage to inquire the fashion of the costume in which Anne Jane started to make her uncomfortable pilgrimage.

"I should advise you to take your cousin to some good medical man," said Mr. Maldon, answering her spoken question. "There is no doubt she is from some cause thoroughly out of health, but meanwhile I should not say anything to her about this walking in her sleep; only you would do well to take the precaution of locking

her door outside at night.”

“Oh! I couldn’t do that,” answered Mrs. Tippens, “If she were my worst enemy, instead of my husband’s first cousin, I couldn’t lock her up in a room alone with old Mrs. Jones.”

“Oh—old Mrs. Jones!” exclaimed Mr. Maldon.

“Begging your pardon, sir, I don’t think you would be right to say that about the worst of sinners, let alone a poor, ill-used lady that, if all accounts be true, led a most miserable life in this very house.”

“Yes, yes, that’s all very well,” interrupted Mr. Maldon, “but don’t you see, my good soul, this tendency of your cousin’s explains the whole mystery; gets rid, in fact, of Mrs. Jones altogether.”

“In what way?” asked Mrs. Tippens.

“Why, only in one way, of course. Your lodgers had heard the story and thought your cousin walking in her sleep must be old Mrs. Jones.”

“Yes, sir, but my cousin never entered these doors till two days before yourself, and for nine months previous to that my lodgers were fainting and flitting on account of the woman who came into their room and met them on the stairs.”

“Is that so?” said Mr. Maldon, in the tone of a man who feels his theory has no more substantial foundation than an air castle.

“Yes, sir, it is quite true,” answered Mrs. Tippens, a little triumphantly—since no one likes to be dispossessed of a point. Anne Jane came up from Brighton the day but one before you took these lodgings. All the same, sir, I don’t mind telling you that she can’t get rest neither night nor day, because of old Mrs. Jones.”

“Dreams about her, eh?” suggested the medical student with alacrity.

“She has been crying her eyes out just now because she declares the old lady won’t let her be. Stands at her bedside every night regular, wanting her to do something Anne Jane spends her days trying to remember.”

“Really an interesting case,” thought the future medical man, who added aloud: “Well, Mrs. Tippens, I can but repeat my advice, let your cousin see a good doctor, and lock her door on the outside.”

“I am sure, sir, I feel very thankful to you,” answered Mrs.

Tippens, and she went downstairs and tossed up a very pretty little supper for Dick and her cousin, during the course of which meal she announced in a laughing way to her husband that Anne Jane was not very well, and felt a bit nervous, and that she, Luce, meant to sleep with their visitor; which information she accompanied with such sly looks and such a world of meaning in her face, that Tippens, looking up from the crab, cucumber, lettuce, and vinegar he was eating in disastrous quantities, answered shortly:

“All right, old girl.”

Consequently, Mrs. Tippens, for once, leaving the custody of her children with Dick, after having cleared away the supper things retired to rest with Miss Tippens.

Mrs. Tippens took the side of the bed next the door (which she locked), and firmly decided she would not go to sleep that night. For about an hour, or an hour and a half, she lay awake, thinking, as she afterwards said, “of all manner of things”; then she “fell over,” and did not awaken till the room was full of the light of a summer morning’s early dawn.

For a moment she could not remember where she was; then she remembered, and stretching out her hand, found the place her cousin should have occupied empty and cold.

Anne Jane was gone, and Mrs. Tippens, rushing to the door, found it unlocked.

Chapter Eight

Mrs. Tippens, assisted by her husband and Mr. Maldon and his friend Mr. Whipple, and one of the second-floor lodgers, who was out of work, scoured the neighbourhood for Miss Tippens, and scoured it in vain. That young person seemed to have vanished as utterly as old Mrs. Jones.

They sought her high, they sought her low; the whole street in confusion; as popular opinion had as yet defined no limit to the powers possessed by Doctor Jones’s wife, little doubt existed that Anne Jane had been carried off bodily by the grey-haired lady as an expiation of the sins of the Tippens’s family in continuing the tenancy of a house on which it was “well-known a curse rested.”

Who had cursed it, on whom it rested, were matters considered quite irrelevant to the general issue. So far sickness had passed over and misfortune shunned the latest dwellers in the haunted dwelling. But now it was felt the day of reckoning had been only deferred in order to inflict a heavier punishment. Old Mrs. Jones was about to vindicate herself as last. "And if you don't get out of the place quick," said Mrs. Jubb, who, during the whole of that memorable morning, conducted herself after the manner of some ancient prophetess, "you'll find far worse to follow. I always told you I couldn't sleep in the house if the hall was paved with golden guineas."

"Dick, Dick," cried Mrs. Tippens, "didn't I beg and pray of you long ago to move—that very first night the children saw old Mrs. Jones?"

But Dick, not being in a fit state of mind either to argue with his wife or endure her reproaches, mounted to the seat of his neat hansom and drove aimlessly about the streets, asking useless questions of persons totally unable to afford the slightest information as to his cousin's whereabouts.

About three o'clock, however, Anne Jane, in person, appeared at her cousin's door, accompanied by a policeman. Early that morning she had been found trying to open the garden gate of a house in the Stratford Road; as, when remonstrated with concerning the impropriety of her conduct, she still continued knocking and pushing the gate, the policeman seized her left arm and told her she couldn't be allowed to make such a noise; then, for the first time, she turned her face towards him, and he saw, as he expressed himself, "there was something stranger about the matter than he thought."

Immediately it dawned upon his understanding that though the woman's eyes were wide open, she did not see him, and that she was not drunk, as he had supposed, but fast asleep.

Therefore he woke her up, and inquired what she was doing there at four o'clock in the morning.

The girl's terror when suddenly recalled to consciousness—she found herself only partially dressed, in a road perfectly unknown to her, held firmly in the grasp of a stalwart policeman was so great as utterly to deprive her of speech. She tried to collect her senses, she strove to ask him how she came there, but no word passed her

parched and trembling lips, in a very agony of shame and distress, she allowed herself to be led to the station-house; but there, when addressed by the inspector, she broke into a passion of weeping, which culminated in a fit of violent hysterics, that in turn was succeeded by a sort of wandering the doctor regarded as a precursor of some severe illness. "The girl is quite overwrought," he said; "I wonder who this old Mrs. Jones is she talks so much about."

"Oh, save me from her—oh, Luce!—oh, Dick! don't let her come near me again." At that moment Anne Jane again cried in terror.

"No, she shan't come near you, we won't let her," observed the doctor soothingly; and after a time he managed to give this strange patient a quieting draught.

"Anyone," as Mrs. Tippens observed, when subsequently commenting upon the conduct of the police, "could see Anne Jane was a thoroughly respectable girl, who had been carefully brought up," and accordingly she did not feel so grateful as she ought to have done to the inspector for sending her cousin home in a cab.

"She'll be better with her friends than in a hospital," said the doctor; and accordingly, when she recovered sufficiently to mention Mr. Tippens's address, she was despatched thither under the care of a staid and respectable member of the force.

But nothing could induce her to enter Dick's house, till Mrs. Tippens had solemnly promised at once to go out and find a lodging for her elsewhere.

"If I sleep here again she'll never rest till she has killed me," declared the girl; which utterance seemed so mysterious to the policeman, that, pressing for an explanation, he was told the whole story of "old Mrs. Jones."

"And the young woman solemnly declares," went on the man who repeated the narrative to the inspector, "that Doctor Jones's wife came to her bedside, and bade her get up and dress, and opened the door of the room, and the front door, and made her walk till she was fit to drop through places and streets she had never seen before, till they came to the garden gate of St. Julian's; she passed through that and kept beckoning her to follow — 'and I know I tried hard, and then you must have awakened me.'"

"It's a rather unlikely tale altogether," observed the inspector,

but still he kept the matter in his mind, and thought it worth while to make a few inquiries and set a detective to work; and had a watch kept on Doctor Schloss, the great German chemist, who lived in a very secluded manner at St. Julian's—the result of all being that one day a policeman appeared at the house, and asking if he could see the doctor, arrested him on the charge of “Wilful Murder.”

“But this is absurd,” said the great chemist, speaking in very broken English. “Who is it that you make believe I have murdered?”

“Your wife, Zillah Jones,” was the answer. Whereupon the doctor shrugged his shoulders and inquired who Zillah Jones might be.

Asked if he would come quietly with the policeman, he laughed, and said, “Oh, yes.” Warned that any statement he made would be used as evidence, he laughed again, and observed he had no statement of any kind to make.

On the way he conducted himself, as was remarked, in a very quiet and gentlemanlike manner; and, arrived at his destination, he requested to be allowed to sit down, as he did not feel very well.

“It is a serious charge to bring against an innocent person,” he said, still speaking in imperfect English. That was the last sentence he uttered. When he was requested to get up, he did not stir. He was dead—dead as the woman whose remains were found, embalmed in a locked box, in his laboratory at St. Julian's.

No one, however, in the neighbourhood where Doctor Jones once lived believed, or could be persuaded to believe Doctor Schloss and Doctor Jones were one and the same person, or that the embalmed body was that of old Mrs. Jones. Nothing will ever shake the local mind in its conviction that Doctor Jones is still enjoying existence in “foreign parts,” or that his wife was buried in the cellar of that old-fashioned house where evil befell all who tried to live.

In proof of which conviction it is still told in bated breath how Anne Jane was never able to go back to service, but was forced eventually to return to her native village, where to this day she earns a modest living with her needle; and how, on the very night of that day when Mr. Tippens removed his family and goods, cabs

and horses excepted, to a dwelling he had taken in the next street, where the lodgers accompanied Mrs. Tippens, a passer-by, looking up at the old house, saw something like the figure of a woman, carrying a torch, flit from window to window, and story to story, and ere he had time to think what it meant, beheld flames bursting from every part of the old building.

Before the engines came the fire had got such a mastery it was with difficulty Mr. Tippens' horses were saved, to say nothing of the adjoining houses.

It was indeed a conflagration to be remembered, if for no other reason than that standing on the parapet in the fiercest of the fire a woman, with streaming grey hair, was seen wringing her hands in such an apparent agony of distress that an escape was put up, and one of the brigade nearly lost his life in trying to save her.

At this juncture someone cried out with a loud voice: "It was a witch the doctor married, and fire alone can destroy her!"

Then for a moment there fell a dead silence upon the assembled crowd, while the dreadful figure was seen running from point to point in a mad effort to escape.

Suddenly the roof crashed in, millions of sparks flew upwards from the burning rafters, there was a roar as if the doors of some mighty furnace had been suddenly opened, a blaze of light shot straight towards the heavens, and when the spectators looked again there was no figure to be seen anywhere, only the bare walls, and red flames rushing through the sashless windows of the house once haunted by "Old Mrs. Jones."

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